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UNIVERSITY OF ALBERTA

How Men and Women Experience Living in a Stepfamily:
A Phenomenological Analysis

BY

DAVID A. THOMPSON

A Thesis submitted to the Faculty of Graduate Studies and
Research in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the
degree of Master of Education.

DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATIONAL PSYCHOLOGY

Edmonton, Alberta
SPRING, 1992



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Between the conception
And the creation
Between the emotion
And the response
Falls the shadow.

-T.S. Eliot

The question of existence never gets straightened out
except through existing itself.

-M. Heidegger

THE UNIVERSITY OF ALBERTA
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The undersigned certify that they have read, and
recommend to the Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research for
acceptance, a thesis entitled "How Men and Women Experience
Living in a Stepfamily: A Phenomenological Investigation"
submitted by David A. Thompson
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Education in Educational Psychology (Basic Program)

John W. Osborne
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Janet K. K. K.

Date: April 15, 1992

DEDICATION

To my daughters, Kara and Sonya, who have helped me to appreciate that although marriages may end, families can continue.

Abstract

This study investigates the lived experience of men and women in stepfamilies. The exact numbers of stepfamilies in our society is unknown, but one half of first marrieds divorce and over 60% of divorced persons remarry. Stepfamilies are a highly varied family form without normative models. Child custody reports indicate that most stepfamilies are formed by men living with a woman who has children, and vice-versa.

This study undertakes a phenomenological analysis of the experiences described by men who live with a woman who has children, and women who have children and live with a man, with the objective of revealing essential features of the stepfamily phenomenon as it is lived. Two men and two women from four stepfamilies were interviewed comprehensively. Analysis reveals underlying themes, from which essential descriptions of a man's and a woman's experience are developed.

Findings indicate the while men and women experience living in a stepfamily in essentially different ways, they share common issues of inclusion, control, sharing affection, identity and family ideals. Articulation of each person's experience reveals aspects of individual psychological processes. Implications include pro-active educational programs and improved efficacy in mediation of stepfamily conflict through understanding its genesis in differing experiences of the same phenomenon.

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CHAPTER ONE

Introduction

This investigation grows from a life project which I have in common with countless other men and women in North America- seeking to feel "at home", following a divorce. Increasing numbers of divorced men and women who value living in a family context are engaged in creating a "home" with a stepfamily. Thus, the question central to this investigation emerges; "How do men and women experience living in a stepfamily?".

Two men and two women living in four individual stepfamilies were interviewed as co-researchers in this study. Each stepfamily is unique in its composition of family members. A salient characteristic of these stepfamilies is their form; men live with a woman and her children, and women who have children live with a man. During the time period of the interviews, no children from men's former marriages resided with the stepfamily, although some men's children had previously lived as household members of the stepfamily, and several visited or stayed with the stepfamily on a regular basis. This pattern of family composition tends to reflect the norm, although variation is common in stepfamilies. Thus, a suitable working title for this investigation might be, "How men experience living with a woman and her children; How women who have children experience living with a man".

Living as a member of a stepfamily involves the everyday sharing of time, space, and relationships and possibly

ongoing interactions with members of the pre-divorce family. Seeking to understand how men and women experience living as members of a stepfamily led me into conversation with others and provided opportunities to reflect on my own experience. Another part of my search led me to theoretical readings in family research literature, further affirming that I am not alone in the "task" of understanding the experience of living in a stepfamily. Most of the clinical literature describes strategies for resolving stepfamily conflict using a paradigm of complex family systems. Here, I discovered new references to how I had experienced a family. For example, "boundaries" having little to do with my experience of picket fences, doors that open and close, or places at the dinner table.

For the men and women interviewed in this investigation, forming a stepfamily is an attempt following divorce, to realize the ideal of creating a new home. This dream is kindled by a desire to house a loving adult relationship in a family context which accommodates children from previous marriages. I shared this dream as an experience in common with my co-researchers. From my conversations, reading, and reflection, I became acquainted with some highly personalized meanings of what we commonly understand as "home" and "family". The object of this investigation is to gather and analyzes complete descriptions of the experience of day-to-day living in a stepfamily.

Today, the idealized nuclear family model, as often as not, is transformed by divorce. As a marriage ends, the

family reorganizes its structure. Formation of a stepfamily is centered around a new adult partnership. In the formation of a stepfamily, these partnerships may or may not be formalized by marriage. New family relationships form complex social structures which may include biological children, a new adult partner, the partner's children, and other kin relationships. The process whereby the new family system stabilizes and regains its developmental momentum is so complex that it is conceived as adding another whole phase to the life cycle of those involved (Carter & McGoldrick, 1980). While children and other kin are likely to be profoundly affected in this process, the experience of men and women in forming a stepfamily relationship is at the heart of this study.

Stepfamily formation is about family change. Change begins with disorganization of a nuclear family through separation and divorce, and continues as the stepfamily moves toward stable functioning. However, while marriages may be discontinued; families- especially those in which there are children- continue after marital disruption (Ahrons & Rodgers, 1987). Following family separation, men, women, and children experience further structural reorganization in divorced, "single parent" families, and stepfamily formation. The focus of this study is on adult's experience of both change and continuity in the context of a stepfamily.

Stepfamilies are a recent social phenomenon, occurring almost entirely within the past twenty five years of our

social history. Our culture is not yet equipped to speak easily about stepfamilies. This fact is reflected in the differing terms referring to stepfamilies, both in everyday usage and scholarly literature (Carter & McGoldrick, 1980). Terms akin to stepfamily include reconstituted family, reorganized family, blended family, and binuclear family. Each represents the interweaving of adults and children whose previous family life cycle has been interrupted. Historically, this disruption resulted from the death of an adult partner in a nuclear family (eg. mothers in childbirth or fathers in accident or war). This study focuses on a more common modern phenomenon- stepfamily formation following nuclear family disruption resulting from the process of divorce.

Arguably, "stepfamily" emerges as the most profound description of this highly variable social phenomenon. "Stepfamily", as related to new family relationships, is commonly taken to mean a connection between members of a family by marriage of a parent and not by blood. Another dimension of meaning is revealed in the linguistic history of "step" family. The root "step" is akin to *astepan* "to bereave" or *bestepan* "to deprive of children". Thus, the term "stepfamily" acknowledges a common emotional history of feelings of loss or deprivation embedded in family dissolution. The stepfamily is a new family built upon the vestiges of the old.

The methodological approach in this study is inspired by my interest in phenomenology and a seeking to understand how men and women experience living in stepfamilies. This investigation may reveal issues with implications for practical application in parenting, education or family therapy. Further questions about common assumptions or therapeutic practices in these areas may arise. It is my sincere hope that any understanding brought forth through this exploration may be useful to persons living through the processes of change in formation of a stepfamily, or to those working with such individuals or families.

Interviews with co-researchers present individual accounts of the lived experience of men and women in a stepfamily. A phenomenological analysis of their descriptions is undertaken with the intent of more fully understanding how men and women experience living in a stepfamily. This objective is achieved by identifying essential characteristics of both men's and women's experiences.

Overview of Thesis

Chapter Two presents a broad review of existing family literature with a specific focus on issues affecting stepfamily formation. The phenomenon of divorce and stepfamily formation is relatively recent. Changing family roles and structures have received attention from sociologists, psychologists, family therapists and

researchers. I will review the contributions each of these fields has made to our understanding of how men and women experience living in a stepfamily.

Chapter Three addresses the issue of methodological choice, and presents a general overview of human science approaches to research, particularly phenomenological methodology. An overview of phenomenological presuppositions, their relevance to this study, and details of the phenomenological method chosen for this investigation are also presented.

Chapter Four presents results of the phenomenological analysis of the descriptive interview protocols of the two men and two women who participated as co-researchers in this study. Results of this analysis are summarized and discussed. In Chapter Five, findings of this study are presented in the context of theoretical and clinical stepfamily literature, with reference to related existential literature. The limitations of this investigation are considered. As well, the potential of findings for practical application and considerations for their use in further research are presented.

CHAPTER TWO

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Synoptic Overview

Documenting the lived experience of men and women who form stepfamilies is the charting of a new area in family research. A preponderance of family literature is based on a model of the intact nuclear family. Stepfamilies have become the "post-divorce norm" in our society (Ahrons & Rodgers, 1987). The mass transition from a traditional nuclear family to a highly variant stepfamily is a recent social phenomenon. A review of the literature related to the phenomenon of stepfamily formation calls for an examination of its social genesis, family theory related to the processes associated with divorce and family reorganization and an overview of what other researchers have reported about how men and women experience living in stepfamilies.

Academic literature is an important source of information for persons seeking an understanding of the processes involved in events leading up to and in stepfamily formation. This selective literature review surveys investigations of prominent issues affecting the life-worlds of men and women in the formation of stepfamilies. Although we live among more and more stepfamilies in our communities, popular culture has given us little understanding of how men and women experience these relationships. Folk beliefs about harmonious "blended" families have been popularized through television. Negative stereotypes of stepfamilies persist in

the family literature. While the myth of the "evil step-mother" has prevailed in our folk lore, there is little positive mention of women's contributions as stepparents. Nor is there an equivalent mythology embodying cultural expectations of men as stepfathers. Public and often professional perception of life in stepfamilies tends to be shaped by mis-information, folk beliefs, hearsay and gossip rather than generally understood social norms (Poppen & White, 1984).

Compared to overall family literature, studies of post-divorce families are relatively meagre. Family therapy literature tends to reflect the pathological aspects of divorce and stepfamily functioning. Research in divorce and family reorganization tends to focus on how family reorganization affects children's lives. These studies are based largely on reports of female informants. In spite of data indicating increased involvement by men in nuclear family parenting, investigation of their experience tends to have been overlooked or overshadowed. Natural science studies of post-divorce families have produced findings that are often conflicting, equivocal, or fragmentary in focus. A majority of the published studies involving stepfather relationships have placed a heavy emphasis on the experience of the stepchildren (Bohannon, 1984). Studies investigating adult issues are rare (Dudley, 1991), particularly those dealing with the lived experience of men and women in step-families (Jenni, 1990).

Statistics tell us of the disruption of about half the nuclear families in our nation through divorce. While some observers interpret this phenomenon as a weakening of the family as a social institution, other family research figures speak to what appears to be a culturally entrenched belief in the family (Ahrons & Rodgers, 1987). The strength of our cultural belief in marriage is supported by the fact that over 60 percent of both men and women remarry within two years of being divorced (Hetherington, 1982). However, remarriage is no panacea, as nearly half of Canadian remarriages also end in divorce (Statistics Canada, 1990).

Myths and misbeliefs about parenting, particularly in post-divorce families prevail in our society (Poppen & White, 1984). The persistence of these unexamined popular beliefs commonly results in misunderstanding of parenting in various contexts (LeMasters, 1970). In this investigation, descriptive information will be gathered and analyzed with the intention of illuminating how men and women with children from previous marriages experience living in stepfamilies.

The organization of this review of past and ongoing literature is divided into four sections. The first reviews an ongoing evolution of maternal and paternal roles in fulfilling basic family functions. This survey outlines the emergence of idealized male and female roles in our culture with a focus on radical changes since World War II. The second section reviews literature pertaining to processes associated with family disorganization through divorce. The

third section is an overview of processes involved in stepfamily formation. In this final section, particular attention is given to questions raised about how men and women experience living a stepfamily, providing the basis and rationale for this study.

Part 1

The Evolution of Gender Roles in the North American Family

Home and family are basic institutions in our society. The process of change within these institutions pre-dates but is most remarkable in generations since World War II. The evolution of men's and women's roles within home and family have been variously conceptualized (Ahrons & Rodgers, 1987; Lamb, 1986). Their evolution goes on as an integral part of social change in North America. Changing gender roles have been seen as both a cause and a consequence of social change. Families have been more affected by these changes than they have been responsible for them (Ahrons & Rodgers, 1987).

Ongoing social evolution alters expectations of how men and women see themselves and how others see them in various roles. Understanding how men and women experience living in a stepfamily is facilitated by Mead's (1934) observation that perceptions of persons and relationships influence how we relate to others. Culturally institutionalized assumptions and expectations about gender roles in family functioning are based largely on an intact nuclear family model. Such a model does not take into account the profound changes affecting

those who divorce and form stepfamilies (Carter & McGoldrick, 1988).

Since the turn of the century, ongoing industrialization and urbanization have been major changes affecting the way a home is conceptualized and the way family members live. Until the 1920's, when our society was largely rural and agrarian, families tended to be self-sufficient and live in multi-generational communities. Home was the centre of production. Contributions of all family members toward production were essential. Household tasks and tasks of production were distinguished by age and gender (Parsons & Bales, 1955).

Increasing industrialization following the First War tended to disrupt extended kin networks as nuclear family units followed employment opportunities from rural communities to urban centres. Families changed from self-sufficient producers to consumers of industrially produced goods. The home was no longer the centre of production. The instrumental function of production once identified with the home was lost to industrial production in factories. The home was placed in an ambiguous position outside the realm of economic necessity (Parsons & Bales, 1955).

The shift to industrialized production brought about a greater emphasis on male-female division of labor. Men tended to work at "breadwinning" outside the home. They were typically absent from their families during the working day. Their work as income earners became highly valued. Ability to earn money providing for a family became a measure of how

good a father/husband a man was. As material providers for the family, men became identified as "instrumental" leaders in family systems. A man's role as instrumental leader of the family system predominated other important functions in relation to his wife and children (Parsons & Bales, 1955).

As men became "breadwinners", women and children tended to become dependent. Home took on greater importance as an expressive or nurturing place. Women's' roles became more closely associated with expressive and nurturing functions. Home as a woman's place was based on the idea that the essence of femininity lay in ministering to the personal and psychological needs of husbands and children (Parsons & Bales, 1955). The primacy of a woman's biological relationship with small children through bearing and early nursing of them, established a presumption that a man be exempted from expressive and nurturing functions and specialize in the alternative instrumental direction, providing for the family (Parsons & Bales, 1955).

Industrialization initiated a shift from an instrumental model of the home as a centre of production, giving its expressive function of emotional nurturing a greater importance. Meeting physical and material needs was still an expectation for family functioning. As urbanization eroded traditional kin contact and support, the home took on even greater importance as a place where basic human emotional needs could be met. The success of a marriage depended upon satisfaction of needs for sex, love, caring, and emotional

support within the family (Burgess and Locke, 1945). By the 1950's, new model of the family emerged, described by Birdwhistell (1968) as the "sentimental" model. Family life had become centered on personal relationships and the emotional support these relationships offered to family members.

The archetypal nuclear family was idealized in the 1950's. Father, "breadwinning" in an urban centre, was the instrumental leader. Mother, "home making" in suburbia with the children, had responsibility for expressive and nurturing functions (Ahrons & Rodgers, 1987; Bly, 1990). This model of the nuclear family became the romantic ideal presented in the media and socially accepted as the model of family life to aspire to. Feminist writer Betty Freiden (1963) characterizes this family model as oppressive to women. She points out the contradiction in our society that tends to undervalue the work of women in the home while "exalting the myth of motherhood and apple pie". Bly (1990) observes that the classic profile of a Fifties man was a person who was supposed to like contact sports, be patriotic, never cry, and always provide. He further notes that the receptive or intimate space necessary for nurturing or expressive functioning was missing in this image of a man.

Since the 1950's the idealized nuclear family with its prescribed roles for men and women has been seriously challenged. Rocketing rates of divorce were a clear indication that all was not well within the idealized nuclear

family. Many more women took up work outside the home in response to dissatisfaction with "feminine" roles. Ahrons and Rodgers (1987) assert that a major contributor to increased divorce rates is that a majority of women assign a higher priority to expressive values than to instrumental values. Women frequently choose to give up a comfortable material situation in order to be freed from an intolerable emotional one. Recognition of women's increased independence, both economic and in terms of social expectations, makes them freer to choose whether marriage meets their emotional needs, and to choose whether or not to stay in a marriage.

During the 1960's, challenges to assumptions about appropriate gender behaviors caused a re-examination of men's and women's roles in the family. The feminist movement encouraged individual and social action toward a more egalitarian social contract for men and women, both in the home and work place. What ensued was a flood of discontent by many women struggling unsuccessfully to meet the expressive needs of the family. Many more women entered the work force.

As a consequence of this personal and social awakening, the two worker family emerged. Ahrons and Rodgers (1987) outline various points of view on the effects of this movement on family stability. The movement toward equality may be seen as a move toward individualism which undermines the value of the family in society. Gender equality in family roles may result in more satisfaction within intimate relationships. More equality may improve the quality of

parenting and be beneficial to children. These disparate points of view represent questioning of how social changes have affected the family as a fundamental social institution.

The addition of the new role of worker to women's traditional roles of wife and mother raises a number of issues for both men and women in families. How will needs for child-care be met? How will men respond to sharing this responsibility? How do demands for more equality in marital power by women affect the stability of the marriage? How does a woman's economic independence change her perspective of what she needs from a marriage?

Gender roles in parenting.

Concurrent with a shift in the focus of women's activities from home to include an outside work-place, a growing number of men have become increasingly involved with their families as nurturing caretakers. Their family role now includes expressive as well as instrumental functions. This phenomenon is most common among those who are college educated (Lamb, 1986), and is a shift in emphasis rather than a dramatic change in traditional gender roles (Strober, 1988). Bly (1990) asserts that a new awareness is developing among men addressing the expressive and nurturing issues that the 1950's male tended to avoid.

Fathers may provide emotional support for the mother or be directly involved with their children by caretaking, playing with and teaching them (Lamb, 1986). Research on intact nuclear families indicates that men generally, spend

only about one quarter the amount of time mothers do directly involved with their children (Pleck, 1983). Through direct involvement with their children, mothers tend to be identified with caretaking, fathers with play (Lamb, 1986). Men may help with housework, although this is an area where domestic roles may have changed the least over the last decade (Strober, 1988). The amount of paternal involvement in caretaking children may be limited by a man's perception that he can do so without his masculinity being threatened (Lamb & Levine, 1983) and by his female partner's willingness to share power within the family structure (Pleck, 1983). Several studies have also examined the relationship between economic contributions and power within the family (Scanzoni, 1979).

Parenting after divorce.

Since the 1960's, divorce and stepfamily formation have resulted in vast numbers of men and women taking on the roles of "single" parent, custodial and non-custodial parent, and stepparent. During this period, divorce in first marriages rose to the current rate of about 50%, with 65% of women and 70% of men likely to remarry (Glick & Lin, 1986; Norton & Moorman, 1987). Precise numbers of these men and women in stepparenting roles is not known, as it is difficult to track accurately the numbers of men and women who live together as "family" without the formalization of their relationship in marriage. The 1991 Canadian census asks no questions identifying a stepfamily as a distinguishable form of

household, but recent estimates indicate that 35% of children can expect to live with a stepparent before the age of 18 (Glick & Lin, 1986; Norton & Moorman, 1987).

Most studies on divorced families focus on mother custody families without a father's points of view (Grief & Bailey, 1990). Family research indicates that fathers in intact nuclear families may be increasingly involved in family nurturing. However, men who divorce generally have less contact with their children as well as with their former spouses (Dudley, 1991).

Within our society the parenting role of divorced fathers varies considerably. While Canadian court rulings vary historically and by jurisdiction, recent figures indicate that physical custody of children has been awarded to mothers as frequently as 85% of the time. A small percentage of divorced fathers are custodial parents, and a growing number are sharing custody with their former spouses. However, the vast majority are non-custodial, and a large portion of these non-custodial fathers have infrequent or no contact with their children (Dudley, 1991; Furstenberg, Nord, Peterson, & Zill, 1983).

Women, as the usual custodial parents, typically experience increased stress from the added demands of providing both materially and emotionally as "single parents" (Brandwein, Brouh & Fox, 1974; Glasser & Navarre, 1965). They also usually suffer from substantially reduced incomes (Albrecht, 1980; Cassetty, 1978; Duncan, 1984).

Non-custodial parents, who are usually men, are likely to be negatively affected in psychological ways, feeling that they have lost their children. This occurs as they may no longer see their children on a regular basis or must "visit" in a way quite different than what they were used to when they lived with their children (Grief, 1979; Keshet & Rosenthal, 1978). These non-custodial fathers also are likely to experience feelings of inadequacy about their role as a parent (Dominic & Schlesinger, 1980)

Men may face a number of obstacles in maintaining relationships with their children (Dudley, 1991). They may have reduced interaction as a result of custody arrangements or experience resentment for financially supporting children they seldom see. Shared custody of young children may require contact with former spouses creating aversive situations through reactivation of unresolved issues related to the divorce. Physical distance or independent children's lifestyles may also affect the amount of father-child contact.

Most divorced men form stepfamilies through relationships with divorced women and their children. Consequently, men living in stepfamilies are likely to become stepfathers, sharing responsibility for rearing and socializing children not biologically theirs. If men were fathers to children in their former marriages, they must determine how to best maintain relationships with them. Women with custody of children forming a stepfamily must make a

number of transitions; from being "single parents" on a day-to-day basis, to sharing parenting and possibly stepparenting with their new male partner and, possibly sharing parenting with their own children's biological father.

Part 2

Families From First Marriage to Stepfamily Formation

This part of the literature review traces social and psychological perspectives of families from marriage through the stages of reorganization in separation, divorce, "single parent" families to stepfamily formation.

Most family research is based on a model of the intact nuclear family (Ahrons & Rodgers, 1987). While the nuclear family form remains the ideal for most (Schneider, 1980), we are witness to the social phenomenon of ever increasing numbers of divorcing and single parent families, the precursors of stepfamilies. Each person living in a family has some preconceived notion of what a family is and how it functions. A family model serves to explain, predict and evaluate behavior and responses of others within the family system. An individual's family model may be developed from experiences in a family of origin, prior families (in the instance of divorced persons), observations of others, and fantasies of the perfect family (Keshet, 1990).

The recency of stepfamilies as a distinct though highly varied family form has precluded the development of normative models. As well, stepfamilies present complex issues and

structures with facets not always fitting well with paradigms developed from investigations of nuclear families. An investigation of how men and women experience living in a stepfamily calls for a survey of research on the psychological processes associated with family formation, dissolution, and reorganization.

Marriage and Meaning: A Social Psychological Perspective

A precept of family sociology since the time of Durkheim, is that marriage and the family serve as social arrangements that may create for a person the sort of order in which he or she can experience life as "making sense". Berger and Kellner (1974) examine the family as a social institution and identify the processes by which individuals function within it, constructing, maintaining and modifying a consistent and meaningful reality. Their concept of marriage and family is a social context for building meaning. This view is supported by several sociological theories. Weber (1956) conceived society as a network of meanings. Mead (1934) presented a perspective of individual identity as a social phenomenon. The work of Shutz (1960) and Merleau-Ponty (1945) presents a phenomenological analysis of the social structuring of reality. That is, a revealing of personal meaning through a reflective analysis of inter-action with our social world.

Marriage as characterized by Berger and Kellner (1974) is a joint construction of reality by the two people who

enter into it. They suggest that the presence of social "cornerstones", such as marriage, make possible a nomic process or validation through building meaning by way of "face to face conversations" with significant others based on a common understanding. This socially constructed world is personalized, modified, and validated continually by the process of living in it. This interaction results in a personally meaningful world contributing to the feeling of being "at home".

Napier (1988) asserts that we bring to marriage the expectation that our individual needs will be satisfied by the other.

In this culture, marriage may be the most popular form of psychotherapy. We all seem to believe that marriage will change our lives, will make us feel better about ourselves. This special person will make us strong when we feel weak, whole when we feel empty, comforted when we feel lonely. This is the magic union, the one that has the power to transform reality. We need only listen to the lyrics of the popular songs to be aware of how widespread these expectations are (Napier, 1988, p. 14).

Loss of social "cornerstones" such as the nuclear family, contributes to a sense of anomie or loss of meaning in a person's world. The rapid and recent evolution of family structure in North America has turned the "cornerstones" of

family structure into metaphoric shifting sands. For steadily increasing numbers of men and women living in stepfamilies, the common understanding of what "family" means is neither shared by their marital partner nor by the larger society. Stepfamily formation involves developing and living in a shared construct of a family model involving integration not only of adults' conceptions of what a family is, but also those of children, kin and other significant social connections.

Language useful in describing our previous family experiences frequently does not fit the experience of men and women forming stepfamilies. For example, a debate continues in family literature about basic naming of "reorganized" families. Are they best called stepfamilies, blended, reconstituted or binuclear families?.

A lack of commonly understood referential language is evidence of the recency and complexity of the stepfamily phenomenon, and the complexity of its structure. Ambiguous terminology also indicates that the stepfamily, as a social institution, may lack the potential to meet the expectation of ready-made meaning we may carry forward from our families of origin or pre-divorce families. An absence of "ready made" meaning for stepfamily experience indicates a need for investigation of the experience of those who live it. A phenomenological meaning of a stepfamily must be newly constructed utilizing the tools of language. Such a meaning may be developed by analyzing and articulating an

understanding of the lived experience of those who seek to feel "at home" in a stepfamily. This process is described by Paul Tillich (1952): "Language gives (wo)man the power to abstract from the concretely given, and after having abstracted from it, return to it and transform it" (p. 82.).

Processes Associated with Divorce and Family Reorganization

It is deceptively simple to state that marriages end and families reorganize themselves. In separation and divorce, the shape of the family is irrevocably altered. The family continues to go on, but in a new form. The complexity of processes involved in this transition has only begun to be articulated by family scholars (Ahrons & Rodgers, 1987).

Carter and McGoldrick (1988) identify three distinct stages in divorce and family reorganization; the divorcing family, the post-divorce family, and the stepfamily. Each stage involves psychological "work" to be completed before the next can successfully be undertaken. Recent research on the first two of these stages is briefly outlined below. The third stage, stepfamily formation, more directly related to this investigation, is reviewed in more detail further along in the Literature Review.

Divorcing Families

Statistically, divorce exists as an enduring social institution. As a process, divorce begins prior to the event and affects family members long after (Ahrons & Rodgers, 1987). Estimates of two to three years for family reorganization and resolution do not take into account the

depth of loss associated with marital dissolution which can affect lives for decades (Brown, 1988). A recent study following up families divorced in the 1970's revealed divorce as the most significant life event for the children and for many of their parents. (Wallerstein & Blakeslee, 1989).

Throughout family literature, divorce and family reorganization are seen as transitional processes. Erikson (1968) terms transition as "a turning point, a crucial period of increased vulnerability and heightened potential within the life cycle". Research on divorcing families prior to the mid-1970's focused on the relationship between divorce and psychopathology, with marital status linked to mental disorder. Evidence supporting this view stems from the psychological vulnerability of many people at the time of separation or divorce (Bloom, Niles & Thatcher, 1985). More recent work (Ahrons, 1980) views divorce as a transitional crisis forcing an interruption of the developmental tasks to be negotiated at the family's particular life cycle phase, creating in their place a series of separation/divorce related adjustments that throw all family members into a state of chaos and disequilibrium.

Ahrons and Rodgers (1987) present divorce in the context of a family system as an ongoing process rooted prior to the divorce event, and extending its effects into the future. "Each family member will be profoundly affected by it: as members of a new kind of family, individuals will be forced to learn new ways of coping and of relating to the society at

large as well as to each other" (p. 25). The developmental dynamic inherent in this perspective of learning within the family system results from change by individual family members within the family system. Relative to previous perspectives based on negative aspects of family dissolution and reorganization, Ahrons' and Rodgers' (1987) views are significant in that they normalize these processes in a developmental context.

Carter and McGoldrick (1988) utilize a family life-cycle model in identifying eight steps in the processes associated with family disorganization and reorganization: 1.) Decision to separate, 2.) Actual separation, 3) Legal Divorce 4.) Remarriage of either spouse 5.) Custody shifts of children 6.) Moves of either spouse 7.) Illness or death of either spouse, 8.) Life cycle transitions of the children such as graduations, marriages, births, or illness. As family life cycle events occur, the divorce is reactivated. They assert that:

....no amount of 'dealing with' the emotional difficulties of divorce will finish off the process once and for all...although it appears clinically that the more emotional work done at each step, the less intense and disruptive reactivations will be (Mc Goldrick & Carter, 1988, p. 408).

The primary process for family members following divorce is the emotional work to be done (Carter and McGoldrick, 1988). That is, the retrieval of self from the marriage. The

task for each partner is to retrieve the hopes, dreams, plans and expectations that were invested in this partner and this marriage. Mourning is required for what is lost. This recovery requires dealing with hurt, anger, blame, shame, guilt and loss in oneself, in the spouse, in the children and the extended family.

Developmental issues for divorcing spouses include acceptance of their part in the marital breakup, working to support extended family members and subsystems related to children and realignment of their relationships with kin. Adjustments required in the process of family reorganization are often thrust upon the family system before divorce issues are resolved. Families in which the emotional issues of divorce are not resolved can remain emotionally stuck for years.

Post-Divorce Families and Recovery from Divorce

The recovery from divorce is never complete as family life cycle issues develop and pose challenges to the reorganized family (Carter & McGoldrick, 1988). Many authors argue that a healthy divorce is not possible without cutting off all interaction with the former spouse (Berman, 1985; Kitson, 1982; Raschke, 1977; White and Bloom, 1981). Yet, couples who wish to share parenthood must maintain a relationship for which no models are available (Jenni, 1990).

The post-divorce relationship is a difficult one for former spouses to redefine. It is based on years of shared memories, jointly created children, and long hoped-for dreams

which must be abandoned. Wallerstein (1989) argues that this attachment, expressed either negatively or positively, may continue indefinitely.

Perhaps the most painful aspect of marital separation is the rupture of attachment bonds that exist between spouses. These bonds serve as the emotional glue of the marriage. Weiss (1979) likens them to the intense emotional ties that develop between mother and child...which carry their fantasized wishes for exclusive and unlimited emotional physical access to the other. When these bonds are undone, spouses often feel overtaken by a terrible sense of loneliness, a sense that they are no longer at home or secure in their world. (Garfield, 1982, p. 5)

Existing stepfamily literature (Goldsmith, 1980) reveals a number of general characteristics of families recovering from divorce. The first year or two after divorce is most difficult for all family members. Most people find their relationship with their former spouse improved after this time. Resolution for the initiator of divorce is likely to be more rapid. The non-initiator may be angry and hurt as much as fifteen years after the divorce (Wallerstein & Blakeslee, 1989). Parental communication is child-focussed. Former spouses learn not to talk about marital issues as they remain difficult and lead to an escalation of the same unresolvable conflicts that led to the end of the marriage (Kelly, Gigy &

Hausman, 1986). The economic consequences of divorce are significantly different for men and women. The majority of men report themselves as financially "well off"; the majority of women as "worse off" (Spanier & Castro, 1979).

Emotional and physical support of the children may link former spouses. Child centered studies indicate that children want and need a qualitative and ongoing relationship with both parents (Peck & Manocherian, 1988). Despite this finding, in the vast majority of cases, children reside with their mother, by mutual parental agreement (Hetherington, 1989). Common divorce terminology refers to the mother-headed household as the "single-parent family", conceptually wiping out the nurturant role of the non-custodial father in a way that generally parallels reality. Women tend to feel overwhelmed with their combined functions of both nurturing and providing for their children with diminished financial resources.

Dudley (1991) investigated the reasons for reduced paternal involvement following divorce, and how men experience the psychological effects of this phenomenon. A pervasive feeling is suffering caused by a sense that they have lost their children. This occurs because they may no longer see their children on a regular basis or they must "visit" in a way that is quite different than what they were used to when they lived with their children (Grief, 1979; Keshet & Rosenthal, 1978). These non-custodial fathers also are likely to experience feelings of guilt about the marital

breakup and feelings of inadequacy about their role as a parent (Dominic & Schlesinger, 1980).

Developmental tasks for former spouses in post-divorce families with children differ, depending upon whether spouses are custodial or non-custodial (Carter & McGoldrick, 1988). Crucial tasks for the custodial parent include setting up flexible visitation arrangements for the children with the former spouse and extended family, re-establishing financial resources, and rebuilding a social network. For the non-custodial parent, developmental tasks include finding ways to continue an effective parenting role with children, maintaining financial responsibilities to one's children and ex-spouse, and rebuilding a social network.

For both men and women, the single most powerful factor in defusing the marital bond and restoring self-esteem is the establishment of a new love relationship (Hetherington, 1989; Spanier & Castro, 1979). Emotional distress eases and financial stress is reduced by another income. For the majority of divorced individuals, remarriage occurs within three years of divorce (Glick, 1984).

Stepfamily Formation

Formation of a stepfamily is initiated by relationship development between adult partners. Living in a stepfamily may involve maintenance and development of relationships with biological children from previous marriages, developing stepparent-stepchild relationships, and negotiating new relationships with significant members of the former nuclear

family. Transition to a stepfamily calls for those involved to make adequate adjustments to the divorce, and to stabilize in the "stepping stone" stage of the single-parent household (Brown, 1988).

The challenge for the family systems becomes one of reorganization rather than dismantling (Peck & Manocherian, 1988). New rules and patterns must be developed for all the habits and routines of daily life that were taken for granted no longer apply. Roles, boundaries, membership and hierarchical structure change, altering subsystems within the family. Relationships with all systems outside the nuclear family change as well. All of this takes place in the absence of norms or social supports for divorcing families. Consequently, the changes are a source of great stress, creating added conflict that interferes with making the transitions.

Stepfamily formation occurs by definition after divorce for at least one member of the couple. For some people, this means that the stepfamily is built on perceived failure in one of life's primary tasks. What norms are available to the stepfamilies are unrealistic or negative. (Bryan, 1986; Cherlin, 1978; Fine, 1986; Nolan, J., Coleman, M., & Ganong, L., 1984; Simon, 1964; Visher & Visher, 1979). Many stepfamilies attempt to hide their family form out of a desire to be "just like everybody else".

Stepfamilies encounter three basic difficulties in their formation (Carter & McGoldrick, 1988). The first comes from

an attempt to draw a tight loyalty boundary around household members, excluding biological parents and others, such as non-custodial children who reside outside household. This prejudice comes from the stepfamily's perceived need to conform to the nuclear family model. A second common issue arises from the stepparents difficulty accepting the biological parent-child bond which predates the marital bond. Stepparents may compete with stepchildren for primacy with their new spouse as if their relationships were of the same nature. A third problem for stepfamilies is a tendency to carry over a pattern from former nuclear families of "mother-caregiver" and "father-disciplinarian". Children with memories of their biological parent vigorously resist anyone taking the place of their parent. Leupnitz (1986) found that children of divorce mentioned "loyalty conflicts" as the most difficult aspect of divorce.

Existing research identifies in a general way, a number of salient issues and themes in adult-child relationships in stepfamily formation. Bowerman and Irish (1962) found that the biological parent-child relationship in stepfamilies is marked by greater levels of insecurity and strain. Duberman (1975) found that stepparents and stepchildren experience greater levels of uncertainty, insecurity and stress than members of nuclear families. Results of a study by White and Booth (1985) indicated that parents in stepfamilies reported significantly less satisfaction with family life than parents in first marriages, and that they viewed the presence of

stepchildren as a destabilizing influence. In Messinger's (1976) study, child rearing ranked highest among sources of difficulty in stepfamilies. Other studies showed that discipline was the number one problem area (Duberman, 1975; Maddox, 1975; Messinger, 1976; Visser & Visser, 1979).

Additional sources of stepparenting difficulties include: the feeling of being compared unfavorably to the same-sex biological parent, negotiating with children about different rules in two or more households, the conflicting values often present between stepparent and stepchild, problems with divided loyalties, the myth of instant love, and conflict with former spouses (Visser & Visser, 1979). These and other issues have resulted in stepparents being likely to avoid communication with stepchildren, consequently retarding the growth of their relationships (Keith, 1978).

Nelson and Levant (1991) report that both men and women describe development of relationships in their stepfamilies in terms of complexity and difficulty. Common issues include: numbers of family members, the lack of shared traditions and histories, as well as feelings of conflict with and rejection by stepchildren.

A common thematic struggle for stepmothers was the "Myth of Instant Love". This is the expectation by stepparents that stepchildren will instantly love them when the families combine. What commonly ensues is hurt, frustration and disappointment when this loving relationship fails to develop. Refusal by stepchildren to reciprocate affection

produced stepmothers' anger. Many experienced guilt because they did not or could not love their stepchildren. Biological parents sense the mutual frustration of their spouses and children while feeling guilty for these conflicts. Stepparents sought to convince, lecture, and correct stepchildren in order to get control of stepfamily dynamics. Biological parents attempted to protect their children and placate their spouses.

Nelson and Levant (1991) found stepfathers struggled more with the theme of inclusion. While women wanted to nurture initially, men wanted to assist spouses, give guidance to children, and bring order to the stepfamily. Their efforts were primarily met with resentment by everyone for interfering. Stepfathers expressed the need to guide and solve problems. They wanted to create new structures rather than understand the existing framework and how they might better fit into structures already in place.

A survey of clinical literature (Ahrons & Rodgers, 1987) suggests that a healthy remarried family allows permeable boundaries so children can come and go between households, and former spouses are recognized as well as former friends and in-laws. In addition, new spouses must accept biological ties while at the same time maintaining marital intimacy and reorganized parental executive system which includes biological parents as primary decision-makers. Traditional gender roles, rigidly applied, interfere with stepfamily function.

In a study of non-clinical remarried families, Dahl, Cogeill & Amundson(1987) reported several characteristics and activities commonly found in remarried families:

1. The "sense of belonging" in a remarried family took as much as five years, especially if children were adolescents.
2. Most families moved or extensively redecorated the family residence to avoid the feeling of living in someone else's home.
3. Former spouses preferred distant but cordial or courteous relationships with their former spouse and his or her new partner.
4. Serious discipline issues and visitation arrangements were handled by the biological parent. Men were active parents.
5. Childhood experiences in a large family may assist adults in dealing with the extended remarried family.
6. Marital satisfaction correlated with the stepparent's connection to the stepchildren.

The relationship between former spouses appears to be implicated in the function of the stepfamily (Jenni, 1990). Financial resources and disputes, contact with the outside biological parent, residual inter-parental conflict, and the nature of the co-parental relationship impinge upon remarried family function. Remarriage itself appears to alter the relationship between former spouses and between children and their biological parents. Remarriage of either spouse has a negative effect on the frequency of contact between non-custodial fathers and their children (Furstenberg, Nord,

Peterson, & Zill, 1983). In many families, the remarriage provides a clear marker that the former marriage is over. Children who were formerly adaptable may react with anger or grief. A former spouse may become distressed or difficult.

Carter and McGoldrick (1988) identify the emotional tasks in the transition to remarriage as: struggling with fears of investment in a new marriage and a new family; one's own fears, the new spouse's fears, and the fears of children involved; dealing with hostile or upset reactions of the children, the extended family and the ex-spouse; struggling with the ambiguity of the new family structure, roles, and relationships; re-arousal of intense parental guilt and concerns about the welfare of the children; and re-arousal of the old attachment to an ex-spouse (positive or negative).

Neither parents, nor children, nor grandparents can forget the relationships that went before. Children never give up their attachment to their first parent, no matter how negative the relationship with that parent was or is. Having the patience to tolerate the ambiguity of the situation and allowing each other the space and time for feelings about past relationships is crucial to the process of forming a remarried family (Carter & McGoldrick, 1988, p. 402).

When remarriage occurs in the aftermath of divorce, families must resist the urge to close prematurely (Visher & Visher, 1988). Ambiguity, inclusion of new family members,

and the reawakening of painful memories and patterns appear inevitable. Emotional reactivation following remarriage is the norm.

Part 3

Phenomenological Research on the Stepfamily

The stepfamily form as a social phenomenon has become increasingly prominent in our culture over the past two decades. Our understanding of it's form as a social institution is negatively biased and incomplete. Stepfamilies have received attention from the media, family theorists and clinicians but little from researchers. Our understanding of how men and women experience living in a stepfamily is based largely on hearsay, myth, media stereotypes, and the equivocal results of existing research (Poppen & White, 1984).

Family research has traditionally had as its subject the nuclear family or its isolated components. In the past twenty five years, we have witnessed a transformation in the nuclear family form. During this time, divorce rates of first marriages have risen to their present levels of about 50%. Divorced families and single parent households, the precursors of stepfamilies, have received some attention in the family literature. The main focus in researching divorced families has been the psycho-pathological effects of divorce on adults and adjustment difficulties for children in the aftermath of divorce.

Statistics Canada (1990) indicates that presently, over 60% of men and women who divorce remarry. No provision was made in the 1991 Canadian census to calculate the vast numbers of those we see in our midst who form stepfamilies without the formalization of remarriage. Of those who remarry to form stepfamilies, about 50% re-divorce. Thus, while we have a strong sense of stepfamilies becoming the contemporary "post-divorce norm", we lack such basic information as their exact numbers in our society. While there is a large segment of our population living in stepfamilies, there is an absence of a comprehensive body of stepfamily research. This leaves the general population and an ever growing number of people directly or indirectly involved with stepfamilies with inadequate information about stepfamily formation.

The complexity and interactive nature of the stepfamily form presents difficulty in conducting a meaningful investigation. Most existing stepfamily research consists of natural science studies. The basis of these studies is the isolation and quantification of particular aspects of the stepfamily system.

Stepfamilies are highly varied in their form. Their structural complexity is compounded by interaction of sub-systems within the family system, interaction of sub-systems of the extended and former nuclear families, and by the stepfamily's own developmental dynamic. The net result of this complexity is a diminished utility of conventional approaches in stepfamily research (Hobart, 1988). When

specific variables are isolated and investigated, results are often equivocal (Jenni, 1990). Existing stepfamily research does not present a unified statement.

Clinical findings and theoretical systems approaches to stepfamily research fares little better with critics. Clinical reports on stepfamilies perpetuate a problem-oriented focus and reinforce their pervasive negative stereotype. Rakoff (1988) suggests that a systems approach to investigating a many faceted stepfamily is an inadequate metaphor; "You think you've got a bucket, but you've really got a basket" (Rakoff, 1988).

Human science approaches represent a viable complement to existing stepfamily research. A tradition of human science is a wholistic approach with an emphasis on understanding human behavior in context rather than as isolated abstraction (Osborne & Angus, 1988). A specific methodology within the realm of human science is phenomenological analysis. This methodology takes a step by step approach in determining how a particular phenomenon is experienced by those who live it. Frankel (1985) asserts that phenomenological methodology is a viable method for investigating various aspects of complex social systems, such as the stepfamily.

Few researchers have investigated the lived experience of men or women in complex family systems. Jenni (1990) investigated men's experience of their former spouses using phenomenological methodology. She suggests that

investigations of complex family systems are an important application for phenomenological methodology:

"One may expand the notion of co-constitution to include the family, with its persistent myths, circumstances such as beliefs and events of the particular historical and cultural era in which the family exists, and often random events, such as death and disability. The family is multi-constituted. (Jenni, 1990, p. 146)

In accord with this position, I have pursued this investigation of how a stepfamily is lived by both men and women. The essential characteristics of a stepfamily may be illuminated by an analysis of both genders' descriptions of their lived experience.

The absence of a wholistic understanding of the lived experience of men and women in stepfamilies speaks to the necessity and utility of this study. As little research exists in this area, the growing numbers of men and women forming or living in a stepfamily too often have the sense that the difficulties they undergo are unique to them (Nelson & Levant, 1991). Findings of this investigation may be useful in understanding how men and women experience the phenomenon of the stepfamily.

Summary

The recent phenomenon of the stepfamily occurs in a social context which has evolved along with changing maternal

and paternal roles, and expectations of home and family. While the traditional nuclear family has been transformed, human needs for family remain much the same (Rakoff, 1988). How men and women meet these needs continues to be explored.

Theoretical literature on divorced and remarried families generally focuses on the formation of complex social systems. The complexity of these systems propels a search for meaningful models. Ahrons' and Rodgers' (1980, 1987) concepts of the "binuclear" divorced family structure, and their postulation of normative developmental processes in divorce and family reorganization, are regarded as radical but tenable theories.

Clinical literature dealing with divorce and stepfamily formation generally focuses on individual emotional and interpersonal problems involved in associated processes. In divorce and stepfamily formation, each family member is affected by a number of profound changes. The magnitude of adjustment required by all family members is perhaps best summed up by Carter and McGoldrick (1988). They assert that the disruptions of divorce and family reorganization add another complete "phase" to the life cycle of a family.

Most existing stepfamily studies have been done using natural science methodology. These research have investigated the stepfamily from the perspective of an outside observer. The present investigation describes the stepfamily system from an inside perspective, how it is experienced by men and women. Adding the perspective of a phenomenological analysis

to what we know of the stepfamily holds the promise of complementing results of existing natural science studies.

CHAPTER THREE

The Method

This chapter begins by addressing the rationale for choosing the methodology used in investigating how men and women experience living in a stepfamily. The following sections outline the particular phenomenological method chosen, specific procedures adopted, criteria for selection of co-researchers, and the manner in which data were collected and analyzed.

Rationale

The present study utilizes a qualitative research approach. This approach is based on phenomenological procedures for gathering and analyzing data related to the question of how men and women experience living in a stepfamily. Phenomenological methodology is a useful approach for this investigation because we can obtain first person descriptions of men's and women's experiences. The results obtained using this approach may help us to understand the experience of men and women in stepfamilies, and possibly increase our understanding of the stepfamily experience itself.

In the family literature most stepfamily research is quantitative and child centered. These investigations have produced divergent conclusions about stepfamilies. They are incomplete in that they have tended to overlook the lived experiences of men and women in stepfamilies.

A phenomenological approach differs from the quantitative approaches used in most stepfamily studies. It has different assumptions and requirements which make it an appropriate methodology for this investigation. Phenomenology does not impose structures from outside the experience, but examines an experience as it is lived by the person who experiences it. A co-researcher's experience is re-presented through language in the reflective process of description. The researcher is involved in analyzing the descriptions gathered in interviews. Themes identified in descriptions are grouped and synthesized in determining essential characteristics of a co-researcher's lived experience.

As stepfamilies continue to emerge as a social phenomenon, it is critical to develop a description of how men and women experience living in them.

Methodological Considerations

Natural science and human science approaches in psychology represent complementary ways of examining what it means to be human. Phenomenological methodology is a part of the growing tradition of human science and embodies a number of specific methods. Human science approaches the complex human subject in a wholistic fashion with a focus on the life-world of an individual. In a phenomenological investigation, the lived experience of a human subject is recorded as it presents itself in descriptive interviews.

Phenomenology is a method of research which is qualitative rather than quantitative (Schwartz & Jacobs, 1979). In phenomenological research natural language is primary in gaining access to the life-world of the experiencing subject or co-researcher. A phenomenological researcher records and subsequently analyzes descriptions of the lived experience of a phenomenon as presented from the experiencing person's point of view. This is in contrast to the approach taken by a quantitative researcher, who groups, records, and assigns numbers to aspects of observable behavior in such a way that it may be analyzed statistically.

The principal methodological step in phenomenology is gathering descriptions of first person experiences. Through the process of bracketing, the researcher states her/his awareness of as many of her/his assumptions about the phenomenon as possible. Phenomenological analysis leads to the discovery of essences or structures through the "process of identification and elimination of theoretical constructs and symbolism in favor of a return to the unadulterated phenomenon" (Speigelberg, 1982).

Phenomenology is a method which permits a researcher to understand a described experience through reflection upon it. No claims are made about abstract reality. Perceived reality is the primary reality, giving us the first and truest sense of "real" (Edie, 1964). The researcher records a comprehensive description of a person's experience of some phenomenon. Systematic analysis of these descriptions reveals

certain essences or invariant structures which constitute the experience of something. Our understanding is achieved through analysis involving explication of essential meaning implicit in the natural language of the descriptive data.

The underpinning of this study is an existential viewpoint. "Existential" and "existentialism", as applied here, reflect the meaning originally articulated by Kierkegaard (1944) rooted in the Latin "existo " literally meaning to "stand out", "to become", "to emerge". These definitions express an understanding of human existence that is not static, but as "a becoming" and, therefore, as continually changing. Existential-phenomenology presents persons existing co-constitutionally with their world. That is, human experience is both construed by the subject and mirrored from the consciousness of something (Osborne, 1990), either out in the world (transcendent objects) or within the subject, such as memory or fantasy (immanent objects). An existential perspective underlies the discussion of each co-researcher's experience.

Utilizing the Phenomenological Approach

Stepfamilies are generally regarded in the literature as complex and highly varied structures. Phenomenology provides a means for discovering essential aspects of this phenomenon as they present themselves in a man's or woman's description of lived experience in a stepfamily. If confusion and

conflict are part of this experience, phenomenology allows them to appear as well.

Cherlin (1978), suggests that difficulties encountered by couples in stepfamily formation stem from lack of institutionalized guidelines for solving many common problems of their remarried life...family members face problems quite unlike those in first marriages-- problems for which institutionalized solutions do not exist. And without accepted solutions to their problems, families of remarriages must resolve difficult issues by themselves. As a result, solving everyday problems is sometimes impossible without conflict and confusion among family members. (Cherlin, 1978, p. 642)

In this study, men and women were asked to describe their present experience of living in a stepfamily. If past experiences and the divorce and remarriage process are involved, these will also be described. In the tradition of phenomenological investigation, I will bracket my own presuppositions and suspend moral judgements about the stepfamily. In contrast to many investigations focus on a problem oriented research question , I do not assume that there is "something wrong" (or "something right") in how a man or a woman experiences living in a stepfamily. For example, if boundary issues, prominent in the literature, are part of the phenomenon, they will be revealed in analysis.

Family research tends to reflect conventional views based on "respectable" responses about marriage and family

(Edmonds, 1967) Each person has individual convictions about what constitutes "a good family" (Berger & Kellner, 1974). Phenomenology obtains complete descriptions of a person's experience making it more difficult for men and women to produce conventional responses. This process allows us to extend our understanding beyond stereotypical values. Myths, fantasies and misbeliefs about life in stepfamilies (Poppen & White, 1984) can be put aside in favor of the descriptions of lived experience.

Selection of The Co-Researchers

The criteria for selection of co-researchers is an important consideration for the phenomenological researcher. Generally, co-researchers are selected for their ability to access and report the particular phenomenon under investigation. This condition requires finding persons who are able and willing to describe verbally their everyday experience of the phenomenon being studied. Becker (1986) asserts that co-researchers who are homogeneous in characteristics such as age, sex or educational level provide a deep understanding of the phenomenon of interest. Others (Alapack, 1973; Anastoos, 1983; Wertz, 1983) believe that differences among co-researchers may achieve the same end.

In this study co-researchers are two men and two women, each previously married, with children from their former marriages. Among these co-researchers, women's children live

in the stepfamily home. Men's children "visited" or at some time were temporarily resident in the stepfamily home.

Using descriptions of experiences of both genders was intentional. Gender roles in families have historically been socially prescribed. If there are differing essential experiences for men and for women, they will be described. As well, all descriptions will be compared for the purpose of explication of similarities or differences in experiences of individual men and women.

All co-researchers were known to the researcher. Each person volunteered to participate, and was assessed as being suitable for their ability to access and articulate their experience of the phenomenon. Men and women were not interviewed as "couples", but rather as persons whose common experience, upon analysis, may reveal essences or structures shared in a way which transcends the individual's particular circumstances. The following biographic details about co-researchers are presented with pseudonyms used in the Results and Discussion sections.

Penny is a graduate student in her mid-forties. She has three school age children and had been involved in a stepfamily for three years. At the time of our interview, she had left her common-law partner with the intention of terminating their relationship. She has custody of her children who visit their father occasionally.

Diana is a professional woman in her early forties. Over the seven year course of her common-law stepfamily

relationship, two of her three children have completed school, taken jobs and established their own residences. At the time of her divorce, Diana had custody of her children who continued to visit their father on a self-regulated schedule.

James is a professional man in his early fifties. After his divorce James provided the primary residence for his son. About five years ago, in the early stages of James' common-law stepfamily relationship, his son lived with the stepfamily for a brief period. At the time of our interview, James had moved to live separately from the stepfamily. He was in frequent contact with his former partner and expressed a desire to reconcile their relationship.

Doug is a professional man in his early forties. Following his divorce, Doug shared custody of his two children, providing a primary residence for his son and having his daughter visit frequently. When Doug remarried five years ago, his son lived with the stepfamily for a brief period before moving to his maternal home.

The voluntary nature of participation in this investigation was explained to each co-researcher both verbally and in the "Consent to Participate" form included in Appendix B.

Data Collection

The procedure for gathering data was modelled on Giorgi's (1975) method for conducting phenomenological research. Descriptions were gathered from two interviews with

each subject. In the tradition of phenomenological research I began my analysis by reflecting on these descriptions. Descriptive language was interpreted to reveal psychological meaning. Psychological meaning was abstracted in the development of essential descriptions illuminating how men experience living with a woman who has children and how women who have children experience living with a man.

As part of the interview process, I explained the purpose of the study, the voluntary nature of participation, and the co-researcher's right to withdraw without prejudice at any time. Interviews were conducted at a time and in a place mutually convenient for myself and co-researchers. Follow-up interviews were conducted with all co-researchers. Interviews were tape recorded and transcribed verbatim for analysis.

In each interview, I attempted to follow the conversational lead of the co-researcher, asking for amplification or clarification of responses or pursuing areas that appeared closed to the co-researcher. I attempted to remain conscious of my own related prior knowledge and concerns in order to minimize their effect in shaping interview outcomes. Based on my foreunderstanding of the phenomenon, possible areas to be covered in the interview included co-researcher's kin relationships including present partner, former spouse, present partner's former spouse, children and step-children. My own identification with issues in these relationships includes: the existential question of

being as "a part of" or "apart from" others; how family "boundaries" affect inclusion; how adults share affection and authority in a stepfamily; how couples and families share time and space; and, how patterns established in former family experience affect the stepfamily.

Data Analysis

Data analysis was based on Giorgi's (1985) procedure. Six steps for processing the transcribed data are outlined below:

1. Reading the descriptions through at least once to get the general sense.
2. Breaking down the whole description into naturally occurring meaning units; searching for meaning units related to the experience of living in a stepfamily and excerpting these meaning units.
3. Transforming meaning units into paraphrases to reveal implicit values or knowledge through reflection and imaginative variation. This transformation is intended to "arrive at a general category by going through the concrete expressions and not by abstraction or formalization, which are selected according to the criteria accepted (Giorgi, 1985, p. 17).
4. Analyzing a paraphrase of each meaning unit to determine its predominant theme(s), and clustering related themes.
5. "Synthesis of transformed meaning units into a consistent statement of structure" (Giorgi, 1985, p. 19).

6. Comparing variability among co-researchers and determining what is seen as the essential experience.

In developing essential descriptions, I followed Wertz's (1984) outline of five steps clarifying the manner in which the observer seeks to understand the psychological essence of a phenomenon:

1. Empathic immersement in the world of description.
2. Slowing down and dwelling; not passing by superficially uninteresting detail as though it were already understood.
3. Magnification and amplification of the situation.
4. Suspension of belief and employment of intense interest; imagining what living the situation as he or she does means to the co-researcher.
5. Turning from objects to their meanings as perceived by the co-researcher.

Once the individual structure had been established, the next step was to move to the phenomenon in general by combining several structures into a description which includes a diversity of experience from several subjects.

Data Analysis Procedure

Processing of interview material involved working through the data in six steps:

1. Transcribing verbatim individual interview protocols.
2. Repeatedly reading through individual protocols, reflecting and allowing spontaneous meaning units to emerge.

3. Interrogating meaning units in individual protocols revealing each person's experience: i.e. What does this statement reveal about a man's experience? Meaning units not addressing the phenomenon are discarded. The original language remains in the interview excerpts.
4. Transforming meaning units in individual protocols into language expressing psychological meaning of each person's experience of the stepfamily. The researcher amplified the psychological meanings of subjects' descriptions through paraphrases of the original text and identified thematic content of meaning units.
5. Using clusters of related themes from the protocols of each co-researcher, and reflecting on previous stages of data analysis in order to develop an integrated paraphrase of each person's situated experience of the phenomenon. These paraphrases of experiences of each gender were synthesized to form a fundamental description of men's and women's experience.
6. Further reflection on combined protocols of each gender allowed articulation of essential features of the phenomenon as situated aspects of fundamental descriptions recede.

A final comparison of the essential structures of men's and women's experiences is presented. Included with this is a discussion which relates findings of this investigation with scholarly and clinical literature.

Excerpts of each of the four interview transcriptions have been modified to remove identifying information. An

analysis of transcribed excerpts is included in the results section. A complete verbatim transcription of an interview with one of the co-researchers is included in Part A of the Appendix section.

Interpretations of the data were shared with subjects, with the objective of assessing empathic generalizability or how well the syntheses reflected the experiences of the co-researchers and to present them with the opportunity to reflect further and to provide feedback. A letter to one of the co-researchers requesting feedback is included in Part C of the Appendix section.

CHAPTER FOUR

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Introduction

This chapter presents individual descriptions of each co-researcher and an analysis of each person's experience of a stepfamily. The organization of descriptive materials and analysis are outlined below.

Descriptions include: personal information presented under pseudonyms, the analysis of each person's experience in tabular form; and a descriptive paraphrase of his/her experience of the stepfamily. This descriptive material is the basis of levels 1-4 of the analysis.

Six levels of analysis based on complete descriptions in interviews with co-researchers is organized in the following way:

Levels 1-3

Complete descriptions of co-researchers experience contained in verbatim transcriptions are Level 1 of the analysis. The sample presented in Appendix A is a complete verbatim transcription of the initial and follow-up interviews with "Diana". Identified meaning units, presented as excerpts, are Level 2. Paraphrases and identified themes are Level 3 of the analysis. Excerpts, paraphrases and themes identified from descriptive protocols are presented here in Table 1 (Doug), Table 3 (James), Table 5 (Penny), Table 7 (Diana). In each of the tables, directly across from the interview excerpts, are outlined paraphrases and themes from

the first person descriptions of experience. These are used in Levels 1-3 of the interpretive analysis revealing the structure of the stepfamily phenomenon.

Level 4

The clusters of related themes for each of the co-researchers are presented in Table 2 (Doug), Table 4 (James), Table 7 (Penny) and Table 8 (Diana). An Integrated Paraphrase of each person's experience of a stepfamily follows each thematic cluster.

Level 5

Integrated paraphrases of men's and women's lived experience are synthesized and presented at Level 5 of the analysis as "Fundamental Descriptions". This procedure, similar to the methods used by Giorgi (1985) and Alapack (1986) involves a systematic interpretation, paraphrasing and thematizing of each co-researcher's protocol.

Level 6

At Level 6 the phenomenological reductions are presented as the Essential Descriptions of experiences of a man living with a woman who has children, and of a woman who has children and lives with a man. Essential descriptions are developed by the researcher based on a synthesis of fundamental descriptions from level 5. Men's common themes are shown in Table 9. Women's common themes are shown in Table 10. Central themes from men's and women's protocols are then cross compared and discussed with regard to their differences and similarities, resulting in a generalized

description of the phenomenon as a whole. Essential themes in stepfamily structure are shown in Table 11. The chapter concludes with an annotated discussion presenting a comparison of experiences within and between the genders.

DougPersonal Information

Doug holds a graduate degree and works in his profession. He is in his early forties and was married for nearly twenty years. Following his divorce, Doug shared custody of his two children, providing a primary residence for his son and having his daughter visit frequently. He dated for about a year before his remarriage five years ago. Prior to my interviews with Doug, his son lived with him briefly in the stepfamily, but "it didn't work out". Doug now lives with his wife and her two sons. His stepsons visit their father several times per year for periods of up to a month at a time.

Excerpts from interviews with Doug are listed in the first column of Table 1. They appear in the order in which he presented them. Clusters of related themes from Doug's description are found in Table 2, which is followed by an integrated paraphrase of his experience.

Table 1
Thematic Abstraction of Doug's Lived Experience in a Stepfamily

Excerpts from transcribed interview	Two Levels of Abstraction	
	1. Paraphrases	2. Themes
1. I've wondered if I still had feelings for her (his former wife), but the more I think about it, no, it's not her I have the feelings for, it's the condition, it's the family, it's the home.	Feels nostalgic for "the condition of home" as distinct from feelings for his former spouse	Nostalgia for home and family
2. I have a fantasy there of family. And it's unfilled and I still have a real hunger for that.	Hungers for the experience of his fantasy of "the family"	Nostalgia for home and family
3. I was raised in a situation where I felt home was home. I had a situation where I had a supportive sort of environment.	Remembers an inviolate supportive environment in his childhood home	Nostalgia for childhood home
4. I used to go out and raise a little shit with neighbours and go down town and get into trouble or go into the Chinese restaurant and do stuff I wasn't supposed to do. I used to come and jump the picket fence, and jumping over the picket fence, I was in home territory. And it was almost like an orgasm, just to feel the drain of responsibility and safeness.	Recalls the bodily felt experience of safety and freedom from responsibility in his childhood home	Nostalgia for security of home
5. Talk about a level of tranquility. I guess that's a part of my past that I want to get to. I want to be able to drive up into the driveway, and if I've had a shitty day, just to feel I'm home.	Identifies tranquility of childhood home as present ideal	Idealizes tranquility of childhood home
6. When I was a kid, I'd jump over that fence, and I'd go into the house, and I might catch royal shit or get it across the ass, but you know, that didn't make any difference. I knew I was there. When I come into this environment (the stepfamily) any disruption is uncomfortable	In spite of parents' discipline, his childhood home had a profound quality of comfort, something easily disrupted in the environment of his stepfamily	Stepfamily home falls short of nostalgic ideal
7. We went into this marriage on the wrong foot, in a way. She already had her inheritance. There, everything goes to the kids. And I think those kids represent something. I don't want her money, but I resent the fact that I'm locked out.	Resents feeling locked out of the history and inheritance of his new partner's family	Outsider in the stepfamily home
8. She'll say things like, "D, why don't you take an interest in the house?" "Well, I really don't own it. Like, if I owned a part of this house, I'd probably take more interest in it."	Feels disinterested in the family home due to lack of ownership	Outsider in the stepfamily home
9. She'll get angry with me and tell me she's not made of money. The next day she'll phone the guy I suggested. And yet she has to tell me. That's the thing I don't understand. So, I get angry and tell her to fuck off.	Feels angry with his wife's initial rejection of his suggestions about home improvements	Struggle for power Stepparent as an outsider

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| 10. It seems stupid to have to talk to a counsellor, because we're bright, intelligent and intellectual. We can sit down and discuss things rationally. | Feels frustrated that rational discussions with his wife cannot resolve their differences | Frustration in resolving differences
Resistance to help |
| 11. I sometimes get pissed off that I didn't maintain a relationship that was decent with my first wife, and I think I'm angry that I didn't have a stable situation in which I could have raised my children. | Feels anger and regret about his role in the demise of his marriage and subsequent loss of family life | Regret for loss of former nuclear family |
| 12. I think about my grand kids. I think about when these kids (his stepchildren) get married and bring their kids around the house. I see this 70 year old asshole sitting in a rocking chair, pissed off. And it scares me. I'm not sure I want to be married because of that, because I'm scared about how it's going to be. I don't want to die thinking I never rose above that. | Feels angry and fearful that issues of resentment with his stepchildren may never be resolved | Fear
Self-loathing
Distancing |
| 13. If I'd have been half as mature in my first relationship as I am now, the first relationship wouldn't have been in as much jeopardy. | Realizes he did not possess in his first marriage the "maturity" gained in the process of stepfamily formation | Guilt
Regret for first marriage |
| 14. I've never had anybody in my life pay as much attention to me, to my moods and feelings. I think sometimes I've got it all by the tail. But then that person is another person, they're not your slave and you only push that so far. And when it comes to kids (his stepchildren) I don't push it at all. | Values the way his wife meets his needs; identifies her individual being and connection with her children as limiting factors on how his needs can be met | Fear
Self-loathing
Distancing
Feels he doesn't deserve it |
| 15. I keep going back to trying to feel at home. I just can't feel comfortable. When I was at home, I was at home. I could take an incredible amount of abuse for that other person, and the payoff was that when I was at home I was at home. | Dwells on his sense of loss of the comfort identifies with his family of origin; experiences his stepfamily home as lacking this comfort | Doesn't feel safe
Insecurity |
| 16. Now, I don't take any abuse, but that part of me isn't there because it's not my home. I'm not paying for anything. I might as well be in a hotel room. Sometimes that's how close I feel in the environment. That scares the hell out of me. When am I going to find a place where I can relax? | Feels vulnerable as he identifies his stepfamily home with the transience of living in a hotel room | Distancing
Fear |
| 17. I took all these little buggers out golfing. And I come home and she damn near stripped me to get me into bed. It was so important to her that I did this. It was so fatherly and masculine. | Recalls the gratitude expressed sexually by his wife for taking initiative in involving himself with her sons | Spousal support |
| 18. I thought it was really narrow of me not to take her boys out golfing when I was taking my daughter. When I come home there's this four or five course dinner on the table. I enjoyed that, but the problem is, it's just not here (thumps his chest). | Recognizes his involvement with his stepsons is cognitive rather than affective, as with his daughter | Spousal appreciation of reaching out |
| 19. I wouldn't mind taking the kids out but I don't feel any closer to them. | Involvement with his stepchildren is "going through the motions" | Emotional distance from stepchildren |

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| 20. | I really think I'm jealous. I wish I could do it over. I wish these were my kids because I really see some potential there. | Feels jealous that opportunities that exist with his stepchildren were not there with his biological children | Regrets demise of former nuclear family and his distancing |
| 21. | She's got a little eight year old - nine year old kid who really enjoys golfing. And my kid, when he was that age, couldn't give two shits about golfing and whined half the way around the golf course. | Recognizes potential for involvement with his stepson that did not exist with his biological son | New opportunities in the stepfamily |
| 22. | I'm experiencing a lot of dissonance over this. I could probably establish quite a useful relationship, but why should I? | Feels troubled by his difficulty in engaging with his stepchildren | Resistance to stepfamily bonding |
| 23. | I think I'm mad, I'm angry, I'm crying over spilt milk. (in relation to the loss of his former nuclear family) | Experiences anger and regret over the loss of his former nuclear family | Regrets demise of former nuclear family |
| 24. | I'm saying, "Why the hell didn't the first one (marriage) work out?" It's a situation where I see what I could have done but didn't, and what I'd like to do but can't. | Regrets his role in the demise of his former nuclear family; feels frustrated by his inability to relate as he would like to in the stepfamily | Regrets demise of former nuclear family
Difficulty in stepfamily formation |
| 25. | With my own kids I've got two generations. My little one I baby a lot and she's sort of like having this little doll with you all the time. Nothing bothers me when it comes to my little girl, because I don't see her that often. | Identifies difference in ages of his biological children and the halo effect he extends to his young daughter | Differences in parenting/stepparenting |
| 26. | It's painful to my partner because she's aware that I react differently to my little girl than I do to her kids. | Feels guilty for causing his wife pain by his preferential treatment of his daughter, relative to his stepchildren | Differences in parenting/stepparenting |
| 27. | It hurt me because she couldn't live with my son. I'd lived with him from the time he was twelve. And when I married her, he was about fifteen, so I gave him two years of sort of unbridled fatherly attention, and then I met this woman and he had to come and live with us. She says that he is so different with her when I'm not around - that as soon as I walk out of the house, he's a son of a bitch. | Feels hurt and a sense of loss because of his son's incompatibility with his new wife; attributes part of this incompatibility to his son's behavior | Son as an outsider to stepfamily |
| 28. | I think women often want something that we can't fulfill. They really do have some heavy-duty fantasies. | Feels vulnerable in the face of his wife's romantic ideals | Vulnerability in face of partner's ideals |
| 29. | That was the best weekend I ever had with those kids. They just played in the pool and went to the wedding and they shut up and acted like perfect little gentlemen. I might have been the nicest to them that weekend that I've ever been. | Recalls enjoyment of his stepchildren when they were seen and not heard | Depersonalizing stepchildren's |
| 30. | You know, I don't think her kids would think that highly of me. You know they've got to have that memory (of shared fun together). | Feels distant from his stepchildren as they lack a shared history of fun together | Emotional distance due to lack of shared history |

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| 31. Second time around for me was so quick after the first time, I was still in the mold. But I don't think the third time would produce a marriage. It just seems so silly, trying to pretend what you're not or what you really don't want. There's really no advantage to marriage in many ways. | Identifies his second marriage as molded on his first; doubts whether he would marry again, as marriage represents something other than what he wants | Unresolved issues from first marriage |
| 32. The first time I saw her kids picture on the wall, because I'd dated her for a couple of weeks before I realized she had kids, I just went cold. I thought, "You stupid ass. Get out of this one right now because you know that you don't mix with kids real well, and that living with someone else's children would be the worst possible situation that could develop. | Recalls "going cold" at the prospect of living with someone else's children; realizes his limitations in relating to another person's children | Fears
Threat |
| 33. I don't think you could have called me a good parent up until my second child, and by that point I had a whole different feeling about young kids. So, I experienced parenthood with my daughter. I didn't with my son until he was old enough to get involved in sports and stuff like that. Then I took a real interest in him. | Recalls learning to parent his own children as a developmental process, from indifference to involvement | Guilt as a divorced parent |
| 34. So, I've had both parts of parenting, but not with the same individual. I think going through that and kicking my hind end so much for not doing that with my son, I just didn't want anything more to do with kids. I didn't get into a relationship with this woman to be a dad again. | Regrets his lack of involvement with his son; wants only his relationship with his wife, not a stepparenting role | Unresolved past issues
Guilt over inadequate natural parenting |
| 35. With her kids, it's a matter of, "If I'm going to put in that kind of effort, I'll put it in with my son. It's a very self-centered effort. As soon as I saw those kids, I became very aware of that self-centeredness. But it was almost uncontrollable. I couldn't do anything about being that way. | Experiences parenting as instinctive self-centeredness he directs to his son | Unresolved past issues
Guilt over inadequate natural parenting |
| 36. I'm scared about the long term - like not wanting to be a grandfather to her grand kids if I'm going to be that way (unloving) because it wouldn't be fair to the grandkids. I feel quite confident I'll be able to handle my own situation with my own kids, because I think my relationship with my kids now is probably good. | Dreads the prospect of being an unloving grandparent to his stepchildren's children | Guilt
Confused loyalties
Past mistakes |
| 37. I think I can provide lots of love to my kids. But I have a hell of a time doing it with her children. There's a real resentment. | Feels loving toward his biological children, resentful toward his stepchildren | Guilt
Confused loyalties
Past mistakes |
| 38. I have a great deal of affection for her. She's filled a lot of things in my life I didn't think could ever be filled by a woman. She's been very, very generous in her love. And that's all I need. I don't need all the other crap that goes along with this relationship- her in-laws, her kids. All I need is her. The rest of it was looked after. | Loves and feels loved by his wife; distances himself from her children and extended family | Refusal to accept family system
Narcissism
Compartmentalizing |

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| 39. | I enjoy my own company. I don't need to have large numbers of people around me, and living in this household with these two little guys is like living in a hotel. | Identifies his own need for solitude; experiences living with his stepchildren as "living in a hotel" | Discounts stepchildren's needs
Need for own space |
| 40. | I never feel at home, never feel comfortable, because there are these bodies moving around in the rooms and I still feel like I have company. You know the feeling when you've had company and they stay too long, and you sort of sit down on the chesterfield and say, "Oh, God, I'm glad they're gone!" Like to their dad's. | Discomforted by the presence of his stepchildren; experiences them as "bodies", "unwelcome company"; feels relieved when they visit their father | Fear
Loss of control
Insecurity |
| 41. | I was looking for a relationship. I wasn't looking for another family. I had my family. It split. It will never come back again. I don't want another family. I've had my children. They're important to me. | Grieves for the loss of his first family; resents the fact that the stepfamily does not replace what has been lost | Avoidance of past failure
Compartmentalizing
Control |
| 42. | On one side of my house I'm a very responsible person. I get my job done, know the rules, play the game of life. I feel reasonably successful, feel pretty much in control. When I come back to my own home, I don't want to be that person any more. | Idealizes his home as a place where he is free from responsibilities he faces in the world of work | Idealizes home as freedom from responsibility |
| 43. | I want to be that spoiled brat. I want to put my feet up and I want to enjoy my music and I want to enjoy my space, and I don't want any interference. When I was living with my first wife, I had that because our kids were raised in an atmosphere that when dad's doing that, you don't bug him. | Nostalgic for the home of his former nuclear family where his children were trained to permit him to enjoy space and activities without feeling "bugged" | Nostalgia for former family
Organization
Control |
| 44. | My little girl would crawl up and cuddle or read a book and go to sleep, but there wouldn't be an active having to entertain. My partner's kids aren't like that. They have to be entertained constantly. My partner was raised with a lot of activity around. So our lifestyles are different. I was raised differently. | Identifies differences between interaction with his daughter and his stepchildren; identifies his own upbringing as different from his wife's | Differences in parenting/ step parenting
Clash of values |
| 45. | Our situation is blended only in that I'm a male coming into another already existing family. If I had come with kids of similar ages, I might have experienced something even worse or even better, it's hard to tell. | Feels an outsider to the existing structure of his wife's family; speculates about different scenarios based on his own differing circumstances | Stepparent as an outsider |
| 46. | When I have my little girl over and something comes between my wife and I, we childishly take these battle lines and it's like a house divided. It's myself and my little girl versus here and her two boys. The kids don't take those lines, ever. | Forms an alliance with his daughter when difficulties arise between him and his wife | Family collusion |
| 47. | When we're having a little difficulty, we sort of physically separate the kids. She'll take her two boys shopping, or I'll say I'm going to the golf course and I won't take the two boys. We even set up a division that way. | When in dispute, he and his wife separate their activities and go off with their respective children | Former nuclear families align in conflict |

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| 48. I've sat down and intellectually tried to discuss that. It's going to take a long time to find a comfortable co-existence, but it certainly is not going to be the same as if we had our own children. | Discouraged by the lengthy process involved in achieving a "comfortable coexistence"; idealizes the experience of sharing biological children in marriage | Disillusionment with family ideal |
| 49. The first year of our relationship was incredible. She was doing everything possible to keep the relationship afloat. I was doing everything possible to tear it down. I just had destruction on my mind. Like I did the wrong thing. I shouldn't have done this (get married). I can't stand this environment, and I'm getting out. | Recalls his attempts to destroy the marriage and his partner's attempts to preserve it; he felt the remarriage was a mistake and wanted out | Conflict of needs
Love vs Control |
| 50. It came to a turning point all of a sudden. There was a real coldness for about a week, and then there was an understanding that came about that we were trying to change each other too much. Maybe we should set up an environment for more accommodation; maybe I should not be so critical of their table manners; maybe I shouldn't be so critical of their noise. | Recalls a turning point for the better in their marriage, based on his attempt to accommodate children's needs and his being less critical of their behavior | Accommodation |
| 51. We realized that I should have lower expectations of myself in that relationship, that I couldn't be the second father. The kids already had their father. He's good to them. He doesn't interfere in our relationship. The best we could hope for was that I could be their good friend. When we came to that understanding, we had something better to build on. | Insight that he could function as a friend and did not have to be a second father to his stepchildren gives him a more authentic base in stepfamily relationships. | Definition of new roles |
| 52. I can only take it in small doses. I could live in this environment if those kids were only there for a week. I could put all my attention to them. I could give them a hell of a good time, and they'd think, "Wow! Great, Uncle D!" But when I have to live with them for an entire month and just get a few days break, it's the other way around. I get too much of them. | Endures short periods of interaction with his stepchildren but feels overwhelmed by longer periods of exposure to their activities | Fears loss of sense of self |
| 53. I'm looking so forward to them (his stepchildren) being away for three weeks with their father. I mean, like that's going to be like a blessing to me, a real period of rejuvenation. And I need that much more regular than she can grasp that I do. | Sees his stepchildren's visits to their biological father as a time for rejuvenation. | Resentment of stepchildren
Need for respite |
| 54. They're too small to structure time away from them. If they were 13-14 years old, we could just say, "Go live with your dad for a week." | Resents the continuing dependency of his young stepchildren | Resentment of stepchildren |
| 55. This woman fills a need in me that hasn't been filled in years. Some of the affection I get from her, her understanding and wanting me to be somebody- to go ahead, that kind of support instead of holding me down. Like, my whole relationship with my wife was one of chopping the bricks out, just as I was building them. | Feels fulfilled in his relationship with his second wife, supported rather than undercut as he was in his first marriage. | Valuing spousal support |

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| <p>56. It's hard for us when we get into sort of bind, to resolve it, because of our personalities. Mine was too much like my other wife. So you had two of these kind of point headed people trying to come to agreement, and they're not going to. Whereas, my new partner is so different than I am, the difference can sometimes cause a problem.</p> | <p>Differences in personality between him and his wife result in difficulties in problem resolution</p> | <p>Different styles of problem solving in family</p> |
| <p>57. When I was a teenager, I did what I damned well pleased. Then I got married and it got progressively worse over the seventeen years. I got to feeling like a prune. And then all of a sudden you break out of that and the prune gets water again and you blossom. I think I should have waited another couple of years to get to know myself, and get that confidence back that I had when I was a kid.</p> | <p>Recalls "drying up" over the period of his marriage, and "blossoming" following divorce. Thinks he should have stayed single longer following divorce to regain his confidence</p> | <p>Lack of nurturing in first marriage
Nostalgia for youthful state</p> |
| <p>58. When I left that marriage after 17 years, I was damn near a broken, beaten person, near the point where I had lost all that spirit that kept me surviving up to that point. Meeting my new partner brought so much of that back. I don't want to lose it again. She's very valuable to me because of that, so I'll put up with shit.</p> | <p>Felt broken and disheartened after his marriage. Values sharing with his new partner, even if it means "taking shit"</p> | <p>Fear
Insecurity
Spousal support</p> |
| <p>59. The first house we moved into was her house. I tried to treat it like my own, so the rules were like my own home. The kids were really scared of me.</p> | <p>Establishing rules to make his wife's home feel like his resulted in stepchildren fearing him</p> | <p>Difficulty stepfamily formation
Struggle for a sense of home</p> |
| <p>60. If I were to move out, my wife would immediately rearrange all the pictures. I put all the pictures of the kids and their grandparents in their bedrooms. Put maybe a family picture of us and maybe one of your kids and one of my kids up in the shelving and that's it. The rest is going to be neutral, because I don't want to stare at them.</p> | <p>Rearranges pictures to reduce discomfort he experiences with these reminders of his wife's children and extended family</p> | <p>Fear of engulfment in other's family</p> |
| <p>61. She's awful when she gets pissed off at me- she goes into the photograph album. And then she just gets real warm around all these pictures she has of her kids and her family.</p> | <p>Resents his wife's withdrawal into the nostalgia of family photos when she is hurt</p> | <p>Fear of engulfment in other's family</p> |
| <p>62. Looking at moving is the first time in the relationship that I've felt like I'm married. I feel that I'm getting away from (the city he lived in), my ex-wife, my partner's family. The only thing that's really bothering me now is that I'm moving further away from my kids</p> | <p>Moving away from reminders of his/her former nuclear families makes their remarriage seem more real; likes the idea, but feels bothered moving further from his children</p> | <p>Loss of self
Engulfment by spouses old environment</p> |
| <p>63. Our relationship has changed in some ways because of the move. We feel more like a unit on our own. We feel like we have to survive on our own. We have no backups. We can't run home to mom.</p> | <p>Feels vulnerability as well as more identity as a unit in moving away from former supports</p> | <p>Family unity in new environment</p> |

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| 64. I feel a lot more married because we're setting up the household. Even though I'm not sure about her children spending more time with us, I'm more interested in what I have to go through with them and consider them as part of the new home. | Feels "more married" setting up a household in a new community; Sees the new home as an opportunity for exploring new relationships with his stepchildren | Change and commitment |
| 65. I've made a commitment now because I feel more certain the marriage will work. But, up until just recently, I didn't know if I could feel married again. I was married for seventeen years and it's taken a long time to deal with all the shit I bring and all the expectations and the anger. | Reservations about remarriage carried forward from his first marriage are reduced as certainty of his new relationship increases | Unresolved past issues |
| 66. Sometimes I still get pangs of wishing it (his first marriage) had worked out because it really would have made life easier. You know, at Christmas time and special holidays is when you really start feeling it. | Experiences "pangs" of nostalgia for first marriage, particularly at special holidays | Nostalgia for former nuclear family |
| 67. By the time I was twenty five, I was probably feeling that the biggest part of the relationship (his former marriage) had been fulfilled. I spent the next twelve years wishing that life was different some way. Not being able to define it, but just wishing that it was different. I think I lost myself in that relationship. | Lost a sense of himself in his first marriage | Loss of sense of self
Ghost of first marriage |
| 68. In this relationship, she encouraged me to do things I hadn't even thought about. It opened up some new worlds to me. Another positive factor right off the bat was somebody saying, "You know, you're pretty good at that. Why don't you do more of that? I'm really excited about being with you." | Felt affirmed and supported, as though new worlds were opened to him in his remarriage | New opportunities in stepfamily
Spousal support |
| 69. You know this was all sort of upbeat, whereas in my former marriage, it was all competition. A competition, but one I didn't give a shit about. Run to the finish line if you want. I'll meet you when we get there. And then we'll start the whole goddamn thing over again tomorrow. | Experiences his remarriage as "upbeat" in contrast to the meaningless competitiveness of his first marriage | New patterns of interaction in remarriage
Spousal support |
| 70. She doesn't need me to do things for her physically. Sometimes I think I would have been more supportive if she had. I come from an old-fashioned world where...I don't feel that I have to be supporting the woman, I just feel that I have to be even. Now, I kind of have a sense of that. | Sees himself as "old fashioned" in perceiving his role as husband being physically supportive; Feels more supportive of his second wife when she seems independent | Supportive response
Traditional male/female roles |
| 71. Having all the emotional support in this marriage makes it far superior to my first one. | Values the emotional support in his remarriage as something missing in his first marriage | Valuing spousal support |
| 72. If I'd have worked as hard in my first relationship as I have in this one to make it a mature relationship, I think I would have been successful in the other one. | Regrets not "working hard" in his first marriage to make it as successful as his remarriage | Ghost of past marriage
Guilt
Regret |

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| 73. This relationship's always been up-front. We've had lots of issues and had to discuss them. One thing I've really treasured her for is that she's allowed me to say some things that have been very irritating to her. But once they've been said, the pain is gone. It's relieved so much tension, I no longer feel that way about it. | Values his wife's openness to discussion and the relief of tension he experiences through her ability to acknowledge issues bothering him | Values spousal acceptance |
| 74. I've said some truly hateful things that are up front. As soon as I'm able to talk about it, I'm not feeling that any more. | Expressing anger reduces his intensity of feeling | Values spousal acceptance |
| 75. My pangs about wondering whether or not the first marriage could have worked out are mostly when it has to do with kids. Anything to do with being a mom or a dad. Then, I wish it was my own family, my own kids, and sometimes in my own home, with my own wife. | Nostalgia about his first marriage is centered on a wish for shared experiences with his children | Guilt over failed parenting |
| 76. Children link you with other families. That's what you don't have with the second one. My fantasies now are wishing that I had met my second wife first. But then I think if I'd have met her then, I'd have still been the dumb ass I was then, and I'd have ruined that one, too. | Experiences a sense of loss of extended family from his first marriage; sees adversity of the first marriage as necessary in learning his present level of maturity | Loss through divorce
Understanding past mistakes |
| 77. People have told me they see me as a whole different person in this relationship. Then, every time I'd say something or speak to someone, I'd wonder what my ex-wife thinks. And I always wondered if she's going to like me. I measured everything with her. And that was really stupid. | Values recognition for presenting himself as a new person since his remarriage; regrets evaluating everything by his wife's standards in his first marriage | Wounds from past marriage
Self-doubt |
| 78. She compares me to a bronco. She says "Your first wife never broke you, and no one is ever going to break you." She seems to have more fun kind of watching me go free, than she does trying to keep a rope around my neck. I'm feeling that, and therefore I'm more accommodating. I think I'm probably a pretty good husband now. | Values his wife's understanding of his need for freedom in their marriage | Fear of engulfment
Accommodation |
| 79. I sense it (the "rope") when it's there, and she knows that as soon as I feel something, then I immediately back away. | Withdraws emotionally when he feels the threat of his freedom being curtailed | Fear of losing freedom |
| 80. Our relationship is getting stronger now, because we've been through a little more each time. Put a little more on the table, let a little more out, but it's been a pretty open kind of relationship. I'm proud of that, because in the first one, we thought we talked, but we never said anything. | Successful conflict resolution builds confidence in his remarriage; feels good about the genuine communication he has now but did not experience in his first marriage | Confidence in relationship
Valuing remarriage dialog |
| 81. Dealing with her kids, I see something that I think must have been very special with someone else. I think that would have been a very pleasant thing to share with her, to have children. But I didn't share that with her. Someone else did. They're hers and I guess I resent them when I'm upset, because I can't identify with them. | Regrets not sharing the mutual experience of parenting his stepchildren; feels distant from them | Stepparent as outsider
Difficulty bonding due to lack of shared experience |

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| <p>82. There's no sense of me being significant in their lives. Sharing my life with someone else's kids when I should be sharing that life with my own children. That is an agonizing experience. If anything has driven me nuts in this relationship, that's it. If anything has driven me away from her, that's it.</p> | <p>Experiences a sense of loss parenting stepchildren when he would prefer to be with his biological children; consequently, feels distant from his partner</p> | <p>Guilt for lost family</p> |
| <p>83. Other things make me uncomfortable, but have never driven me away like these innocent kids have. They're fine kids. There's nothing wrong with these kids. I just look at them and I feel angry. And a grown man feeling angry at an 11 year old or an 8 year old, is not a comfortable thing. Like, you really feel like an asshole.</p> | <p>Feels guilty blaming his stepchildren for being distancing influences in his remarriage,</p> | <p>Stepchildren symbolize his lost family</p> |
| <p>84. Sometimes I can just look at them, and it's there. It's "Why the hell are you here?" I don't like having to admit that I can have those kind of feelings, because I'm not that kind of guy. It's not an anger that I'd want to hurt them. They're in the way.</p> | <p>Feels angry his stepchildren are "in the way" of his relationship with his wife</p> | <p>Stepchildren symbolize his lost family</p> |
| <p>85. Her kids will come back after a couple of days at their father's place, and for a couple of days I'll feel there's nothing essentially wrong, and I'll joke with them or something. Then, they've been there too long and you don't belong here. This isn't your home, it's my home. You know how you want to kick company out after a while?</p> | <p>Accepts his stepchildren for limited periods only; feels angry at them for being present in the home; experiences them as "company" that's stayed too long</p> | <p>Fear of engulfment</p> |
| <p>86. Being able to talk with her has been my only salvation. I've had opportunities to try to re-design my approach. And I've tried to do that. It would be to the point that I wouldn't say goodbye when I left, or I would say hello when I got there. You know, things that are not right- things that are not morally right.</p> | <p>Feels guilty for his emotional withdrawal from the stepfamily; sees his partner as helpful in trying to overcome this</p> | <p>Remorse
Support by partner</p> |
| <p>87. What I try to do is to put myself in their shoes, and then I really hate myself, because I would hate this son of a bitch, if that was my mom and this bastard was in there- living there.</p> | <p>Experiences self-loathing when he sees himself from the perspective of his stepchildren</p> | <p>Reframing
Empathy for stepchildren
Self-loathing</p> |
| <p>88. I was able to make some changes by standing outside of myself, and look at myself as a jerk, and put myself in their shoes and then talk to myself as if I was them. And that was the craziest thing. I'd never done that before, ever.</p> | <p>Dialoging with himself and his imagined experience of his stepchildren has enabled him to make some changes</p> | <p>Reframing
Empathy for stepchildren</p> |
| <p>89. Because I was such a spoiled kid, so well looked after, and had so much attention when I was a little guy, it was easy for me to understand that this must be awful for these guys.</p> | <p>Recalling his own childhood experiences enables him to empathize with stepchildren's needs</p> | <p>Learning in the stepfamily
Empathy for stepchildren</p> |
| <p>90. I see in their eyes a love that I have for this woman, that they can't understand. They can't understand why their dad can't have that love. Why their mother can't have that kind of love for their dad. I don't know if they're having those kind of feelings, but I'm just sensing they might.</p> | <p>Imagines his stepchildren's confusion over his love for their mother which their father does not exhibit</p> | <p>Empathy for stepchildren</p> |

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| 91. Sometimes I feel guilty that I'm there. I want to run. Let them have their mother. Let them have....what's left of that broken relationship. Let them grow up, and if she's still interested in me afterwards, call. But I felt the odd man out and that I had no business there. | Feels guilty and an intruder in the remnants of his wife's former nuclear family | Compassionate outsider |
| 92. The first year of our marriage was a total waste. I spent almost all my time trying to get out of the marriage, having made a stupid mistake. The second year was better, and the third year I went away (to school). It was almost like God was saying the relationship is good, but let's get him away from it, and her away from it, and the kids away from it and let them adjust. | Recalls his efforts to get out of the remarriage, feeling it was a mistake, while his wife attempted to maintain the relationship; felt stepchildren's need to adjust was divine interference in a good relationship | Difficulty in stepfamily formation
Fear
Avoidance
Distancing |
| 93. Sometimes my behavior when I arrived home seemed bizarre. I guess the resentment was so high. And she knew it. She'd meet me alone and get acquainted for an hour, go for dinner or something, and then go home to the kids. She's very sensitive and intuitive. | Resentment of his stepchildren resulted in his bizarre behavior; appreciates his wife's compensating by structuring time for the two of them | Resentment of stepchildren
Appreciating spousal support |
| 94. She knows these things about my feelings now and she doesn't worry so much about them. It used to be terrible, but now the transition is smoother. | Values his wife's sensitivity to his feelings and her efforts to accommodate his needs | Valuing support by spouse |
| 95. I was looking for any excuse to be mad or upset. Looking for an excuse to say that this is the most ridiculous relationship going. What are we doing here? And she never let me do that. She always kept telling me that our relationship was still worth something. | Lashes out at the absurdity of the remarriage; values his wife's prevailing attitude that their relationship is worthwhile | Spousal commitment |
| 96. It's good to think of each other as spirits, rather than slaves. As ongoing progressive entities. To think of your spouse in that way gives it a whole different color than to think, Geez, I've got to tame this person into my environment. | Values perception of permitting himself and his wife their essential freedom in the relationship | Values spouse's freedom to be |
| 97. The most hurtful thing about this relationship is that I love someone with a passion that I haven't had in years and years, but we can't really share. All I've got is my artwork and a few memories and the odd thing that we can build together, like a physical home, But we can't really share. | Pained by the lack of a shared history in the context of the powerful love he feels for his wife; history feels stronger than future prospects | Perceived lack of shared interests |
| 98. My ex-wife found herself a Ph. D. who was making money, and she was doing fine, so they could afford this nice house on the golf course. It had nothing to do with me. But to try to be somebody, I would say that I was helping to pay for it. It was a goofy male chauvinist thing to say that I got left with nothing and the wife took everything. That was really dishonest, but I wanted it to appear that way. | Indulges his male friends in rhetoric related to the stereotype of the injured male losing "everything" in divorce | Wounds from first marriage |

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| 99. | I thank her for allowing me to talk about my issues from the past. Sometimes she gets weary and says I should talk to someone else. | Appreciates his wife talking with him about his feelings and suggesting someone else when she reaches the limits of her patience | Wounds from first marriage |
| 100 | I wouldn't call it gifted, but I have the ability to sit by myself and play out scenarios. I can do a lot of my own salvaging. I can play two parts in my mind and where they're going. That's helped clarify the issues, so that I knew what the issues were. | Dialogs with himself and the imagined experience of others in the stepfamily attempting to identify and understand issues | Rationalization for avoiding help |
| 101 | I've found some security in talking with other men who are divorced or going through a relationship crisis. | Finds security in talking about relationship crisis with other men who have similar experiences | Understanding self through communication with others |
| 102 | I want to be happy. I don't want to go through all the pain of a relationship that doesn't work. The first one didn't because maybe I didn't try, but this one won't because I didn't try. | Values his remarriage as a source of happiness; feels responsible for making it work as he does for the failure of his first marriage | Valuing remarriage
Responsibility for relationship |
| 103 | My son didn't really fit into the way that her household was run. The relationship became much stronger after he left. It wasn't only his fault, it was her fault. I don't know if it was the way she acted or what, but she was more understanding. | Sees his son as an outsider to his wife's home and an impediment to their relationship; faults both of them for the failure of this living arrangement | Father/son as outsiders
Stepfamily as "wife's home" |
| 104 | I get quite angry sometimes thinking he should still be there. But had he still been there, it would not be good for him and not good for me. He should have spent more time with his mom, so it worked out | Feels angry at the failed ideal of his son living in the remarried household; recognizes the current situation as more viable | Acceptance of separation from son |
| 105 | He was really good with the kids. There was no problem there. But he and my new wife did not get along. She was too tough on him. She was too picky. But he doesn't listen to anybody. No matter how many times you tell him he just doesn't listen. | Conflict in the stepfamily was between stepmother and his son; feels angry his wife did not heed his advice on parenting his son | Father/son as outsiders |
| 106 | She was used to having little kids listen to her, and all of a sudden you have a teenager. If her kids had been teenagers, it would have been a lot tougher for me. They were fairly malleable at the time I met them, and probably changed somewhat. I wouldn't say a whole lot, but at least I learned to live with them. | Experiences his stepchildren as malleable; realizes he has changed somewhat in learning to live with them. | Adjustment to relationship with stepchildren |
| 107 | I don't share many activities with her boys. I'm not sure I ever will. I don't think I'll ever be comfortable. Nor will they. | Predicts mutual discomfort and limited contacts with his stepchildren | Difficulty in stepfamily formation
Fear
Closed attitude |
| 108 | I didn't try real hard to be a replacement dad. If I'm a replacement, it will be as an uncle, not as a father. And I didn't want to, because they are not my kids. | Struggles for a meaningful relationship with his stepchildren without trying to replicate their relationship with their father | Evaluation of stepfather role
Stepparent as an outsider |

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| 109 | They are just people in my life who I have to live with and I didn't choose them. But, I guess your kids are, too. They come into this world and they have their own spirit and you have to live with them. You don't really choose them. | Resigns himself to living with his stepchildren even though he didn't "choose" them. Realizes this lack of choice applies to biological children as well. | Awareness of self/others
Difficulty in opening to stepchildren |
| 110 | There's a warmth that isn't there with other people's children. It might be friendly, but the warmth is different. Talking about it, I reflect on what I've said and I think I can feel some of it, too. I can be a little warmer and more supportive. | The quality of warmth he experiences with his own children is missing in his relationship with stepchildren; idealizes becoming warmer to and more supportive of them | Nostalgia for former nuclear family
Awareness of need to reach out |

Table 2
Higher Order Thematic Descriptions of Doug's Stepfamily Experience

Thematic Clusters	Generalized Descriptions
1. Nostalgia for the Condition of Home (1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 11, 15, 23, 41, 42, 43, 66, 75, 110)	Nostalgia for the condition of home is distinct from feelings for his former spouse; recalls an inviolate, supportive environment in his childhood home, its bodily felt experience of safety and freedom from responsibility; compares disruptive activity in the stepfamily home with idealized tranquility of his childhood home; dwells on his sense of loss of comfort identified with his family of origin and lacking in his stepfamily home; feels anger and regret at the demise of his marriage and subsequent loss of family life; feels overwhelmed by stepfamily and "hungers" for his fantasy of the family; misses his biological children who permitted his enjoyment of space and activities; nostalgia is centered on a desire for shared experiences parenting children; emotional warmth shared with his biological children is missing with stepchildren; idealizes being warmer and more supportive of stepchildren
2. Stepparent as Outsider (7, 8, 9, 12, 30, 36, 45, 81, 91, 103, 104, 105, 108)	Feels locked out of the history and inheritance of his wife's family; disinterest in stepfamily home stems from his lack of ownership; lack of shared history with stepchildren creates emotional distance; feels anger and resentment that his issues of emotional distance with his stepchildren may never be resolved; dreads the prospect of being an unloving step-grandparent; feels an outsider to the existing structure of his wife's family; regrets not sharing parenting experience with his wife and has difficulty identifying with her children; sometimes sees himself as an intruder and feels guilty for his presence in remnants of his wife's former nuclear family; sees his son was an outsider in "his wife's" home, and feels angry his son did not fit into the stepfamily; he forms an alliance with his daughter or goes off with his children when in dispute with his wife; he struggles for a meaningful relationship with his stepchildren, not wanting to replace their relationship with their father; feels angry his input into home building is discounted;

3. Feelings of Vulnerability

(14, 16, 28, 31, 32, 52, 53, 57, 87, 92, 95, 97, 98)

Values his wife's attentiveness to his needs but feels vulnerable realizing she is not his "slave"; identifies stepfamily home with the transience of living in a hotel; feels vulnerable in the face of his wife's romantic ideals; feels overwhelmed by the prospect of extended periods of exposure to stepchildren's activities and needs respite from involvement; feels pained by the lack of sharing a history with his wife, as past memories seem more powerful future dreams; with male friends, he sometimes expresses hurt and anger linked to his divorce in rhetoric of "the wounded male who's lost everything"; experiences self-loathing when seeing himself from stepchildren's perspective; resents his wife's withdrawal into nostalgia when she is hurt; he withdraws if threatened by his freedom being curtailed; establishing rules to make the house feel like his, frightened stepchildren; feels guilty blaming them for being distancing influences in the adult relationship; feels stepchildren's need to adjust is divine interference in a good relationship; feels hurt and a sense of loss because his son and his wife were not compatible; lashes out at the absurdity of the remarriage and values his wife's positive re-framing of this; remarriage was modelled on his first family, and he doubts whether a stepfamily is really what he wants; recalls "going cold" at the prospect of living with someone else's children;

4. Personal Learning in the Process of Stepfamily Formation

(13, 33, 46, 47, 50, 63, 64, 65, 70, 72, 88, 89, 90, 106)

Realizes first family would not have been jeopardized had he possessed the maturity he now has; parenting his own children progressed from indifference to involvement; being more accommodating and less critical of stepchildren has improved marriage relationship; move away from support systems increases sense of identity of family unit; new location results in feeling "more married" and opens opportunities for exploring activity based relationships with stepchildren; sees himself as "old fashioned", more supportive when his wife is less independent; regrets not working as hard to make his first marriage work as he does his second; sees adversity in loss of first marriage contributing to learning his present level of maturity; standing "outside" himself and taking imagined view of stepchildren enables him to change; recalling his own childhood needs enables empathy with stepchildren; imagines his stepchildren's confusion about men who love their mother; appreciates his wife talking about his issues from the past; experiences his stepchildren as malleable and realizes he has changed in learning to live with them; reservations carried forward from previous marriage diminish as confidence in relationship grows

5. Difficulty in Stepfamily Formation

(6, 20, 22, 24, 27, 34, 38, 48, 49,
56, 59, 60, 61, 62, 79, 82, 83, 86,
107, 109)

Quality of comfort associated with childhood home is lacking in the stepfamily home; feels jealous opportunities with stepchildren did not exist with his biological children; feels troubled by his lack of emotional engagement with his stepchildren; regrets his role in the demise of his former nuclear family and is frustrated by not being able to relate as he would like in the stepfamily; loves and feels loved by his wife while distancing himself emotionally from her children and extended family; discouraged by the lengthy process involved in achieving a "comfortable coexistence"; feels pained by lack of a shared history with his wife and experiences history as a stronger pull than future prospects; predicts mutual discomfort and limited contact with his stepsons; resigns himself to living with his stepchildren even though he did not "choose" them; feels discomfort with prominent reminders of his wife's extended family; moving away reduces reminders of former nuclear family making remarriage seem more real but intensifies loneliness for his children; felt remarriage was a mistake and worked to destroy it;

6. Differences in Parenting and Stepparenting

(18, 19, 20, 21, 25, 26, 34, 35,
37, 44, 51)

Activities with stepchildren involve "going through the motions" while connection with biological children is experienced bodily; he experiences parenting his own children as an extension of himself; recognizes potential for involvement with his stepsons that did not exist with his biological son; acknowledges halo effect he extends to his daughter and feels guilty when this preferential treatment causes his wife pain; wants only the adult relationship with his wife, not another parenting role; functioning as a friend rather than a second father contributes to authenticity in relationships with stepchildren; perceives differences in children's and stepchildren's behavior relating to differences in former nuclear families;

7.. Negative Perception of Stepchildren
(29, 39, 40, 54, 84, 85)

Recalls enjoyment of stepchildren when they were seen but not heard; identifies his own need for solitude and experiences living with his stepchildren as "living in a hotel"; discomforted by their presence as "bodies", experiencing them as "unwelcome company"; resents their continuing dependency; feels angry that his stepchildren are "in the way" of his relationship with his wife; after limited periods of time living with his stepchildren he feels they don't belong, it's his home, not theirs and wants to kick them out

8. Valuing Remarriage

(55, 58, 67, 68, 69, 71, 73, 74, 77,
78, 80, 93, 94, 99)

Feels fulfilled in his remarriage relationship, supported rather than undercut as in his first marriage; presents himself as a new person since remarriage with his own views rather than those mediated by his former spouse; remarriage feels "upbeat" rather than competitive as his former marriage did; values his wife's understanding of his need for freedom, and her openness to discussion; he experiences relief of tension when she acknowledges things that distress or anger him; in his former marriage he lost a sense of himself and now feels affirmed and supported, as though new worlds have been opened to him; successful conflict resolution builds confidence in the relationship and he feels good about genuine communication; he appreciates his wife structuring time to reduce tension for him; values and reciprocates her respect of his essential personal freedom within the relationship; appreciates his wife talking with him about issues and referring him to someone else when she reaches her limit.

An Integrated Paraphrase of Doug's Experience of a Stepfamily

Doug's stepfamily experience is tension filled. He is caught between nostalgia for his prior family experience and attraction to "new worlds" his remarriage offers. Grieving the loss of his family ideal in divorce, Doug is frustrated by not feeling "at home" in his stepfamily. He hungers for "home", a bodily felt experience of comfort and freedom.

In remarriage, Doug is drawn to his wife's affirmation of his need for an essential freedom and feels fulfilled in sharing their love. Her support and encouragement gratify him. Remarriage rejuvenates his confidence and sense of identity, withered in the course of his former marriage. Overshadowing their adult relationship is his continued grieving the loss of shared parenting of his children and his struggle to accept and connect emotionally with his stepchildren. Tension is embedded in his remarriage, as he "wanted a wife, not another family".

Doug's stepparenting experience is highly conflicted. He feels vulnerable, fearing his wife's children will "get in the way" of her affirmation of him. He defends himself by minimizing his stepsons' existence, depersonalizing them and discounting their needs. Activities with them are "going through the motions" without heartfelt engagement. He feels guilty for resenting their presence and rejecting them emotionally. Struggling to empathize with them, he experiences self-loathing. He searches for a role that feels right in relation to his stepsons, like "friend" or "uncle".

Doug idealizes being less critical of them and expressing more warmth and support in their relationship. He dreads his own prognosis that issues of emotional distance from his stepchildren may never be resolved.

Doug misses his "own" children and resents spending time and energy with "someone else's" children. Involvement with his stepchildren activates his guilt about shortcomings as a divorced father. He blames himself for "ruining" his first marriage and regrets the subsequent loss of involvement with his children. Doug regrets his indifference as a father during his son's childhood. He feels he has failed his son, who as an adolescent, did not fit into "his wife's household". While Doug cherished being a more involved father during his daughter's early years, he now feels cheated by the limited time they share. He compensates by perceiving her with a halo effect, as his "little girl".

Learning new levels of maturity through the adversity of divorce and stepfamily formation gives Doug a sense of personal growth. During his first year in the stepfamily, he felt trapped in an absurd situation, lashing out and attempting to destroy the marriage. He feels a debt of gratitude for his wife's efforts at salvage and ongoing open communication. Her acknowledgement of his distress diminishes the intensity of his negative feelings. Resolution of stepfamily problems builds his confidence in their relationship. Doug is determined to make this marriage work.

"Home-sickness" affects Doug profoundly. In remarriage, he is pained by the lack of shared parenting and history. He also grieves these as losses in remembering his former marriage. Being in the stepfamily sometimes feels like he is intruding upon the structural and emotional remnants of his wife's former nuclear family. A recent relocation, creating physical distance from reminders of former nuclear families, makes his remarriage "more real". Doug is plagued by guilt and anxiety, "seeing what he should have done and didn't; seeing what he needs to do and can't".

JamesPersonal Information

James is a professional man in his early fifties. He was married for over ten years and divorced some fifteen years ago. After his divorce, he had "lots" of casual relationships with women, and a "few" "serious" ones. During this time James provided the primary residence for his son. In the early part of his stepfamily relationship, James' son lived with him briefly before moving out on his own. James' history in a stepfamily spans more than five years. Other stepfamily members are his partner and her three adolescent children. James stated that he wants to be with this women as a lifetime partner. However, at the time of our interviews, conflict between them had prompted him to live separately from the stepfamily. He was in frequent contact with his partner, expressing a continued commitment to their relationship and a desire to reconcile.

Excerpts from interviews with James are listed in the first column of Table 3. They appear in the order in which he presented them. Clusters of related themes from James' description are found in Table 4, which is followed by an integrated paraphrase of his experience.

Table 3
Thematic Abstraction of James' Experience in a Stepfamily:

Excerpts from transcribed interview	Two Levels of Abstraction	
	1. Paraphrases	2. Themes
1. When there was the prospect of the split, I was very frightened but I feel that my former wife stomped on my fingers and made me let go.	Felt hurt and frightened when forced to let go of his first marriage	Past fear of loss of relationship
2. You know, I went over the cliff and I found that I didn't splat into pieces at the bottom, but I survived. I was a bit bruised and my pride was dented quite a bit, but I got over it and in fact she probably did a damned good thing.	In retrospect, realizes he has recovered from his hurt. Feels some good has come from surviving the experience.	Survival of hurt Growth through adversity
3. It's really sad that when you think that in today's world many of the fantasies we have that go back to the past, the sort of archetypal image of a really integrated loving family with a feeling of support and unity and wholeness, that is something that we all long for but so few of us have had.	Longs for the love and support associated with family living	Longing for wholeness, love and support
4. Even when outsiders have said, "You are indeed fortunate. Your family is very nurturing." But inside the home, we can be subjected to all kinds of terrible indignities by our parents as they fumble and bumble. We do the same thing to our kids.	Acknowledges the pain inherent in well intended family life, but that as a parent he has made mistakes and hurt others.	Painful outcomes of family life Realizing his own human frailties
5. You know it's very easy to tolerate shit from your own kids, but when it's someone else's....Why are these little gremlins running all over the place? Why hasn't this problem been taken in hand?	Acknowledges it is easier to be tolerant of his own children than of other's children	Double standard for parenting and stepparenting
6. That is such a difficult situation, coming out of an environment where everything is predictable, you're familiar with the patterns, so I think just living with it for a period of time will help. Initially, I think it's terribly difficult, not only for the one person, but for everyone.	Recognizes the difficulty in making the transition from predictable "single" living to living in a stepfamily; difficulties exist for all members of the stepfamily	Values control of environment Difficulties in stepfamily formation
7. I just try to assume on a contingency basis, that I need to be able to provide for myself in the future, and that I don't need to rely on another person, even if I'm in a relationship with that person.	Acknowledges his need to be self sufficient even though his relationship has the potential for financial support	Security in independence
8. An issue for me in the relationship is of isolation or abandonment, and that feeling of being the outsider.	Recognizes his fear of isolation and abandonment; feeling like an outsider	Fear of isolation Discomfort with being an outsider
9. It's awfully difficult when you're feeling that to reach out to the children and be as positive as you know you should, because you just somehow or another you're like a fifth wheel, you feel like you're not fitting in here and you're thinking, "What can be done to make things better?"	Feels caught between positive action of reaching out to others and resenting feeling like an outsider	Outsider in the stepfamily

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| 10. | My gut feeling and my style is to be as conscious of these issues and put them out on the table and see if we can keep our cool and work out some compromises and come away from our extreme positions and not feel so much pressure to justify the morality of our point of view | Has an awareness of his feelings related to issues; attempts to discuss them openly, reducing pressure of "must win" position in discussions | Values rational dialogue |
| 11. | I think women are very good at playing the wild card or the veto which is basically just, they sort of screw your little plan up and sabotage it. | Generalizes women's ability to undermine his logical discussion | Vulnerability to sabotage of logic by women |
| 12. | We just kind of bare our fangs at each other after almost nothing has happened. Even before we can get down to talking about an issue we're snarling at each other over something. | Feels an anger in this relationship greater than warranted by the issues | Negative emotionality prevents dialogue |
| 13. | We got into some of the anger and some of the patterns that we habitually employ with each other. Our therapist was able to point out to us how we were just sort of hitting on each other and not really giving each other an opportunity that can be construed as more positive and creative. | Recognizes angry exchanges with his partner as a destructive habit; values therapy as providing positive and creative options | Anger in the relationship |
| 14. | There's an issue here, that sooner or later I have to deal with. I can't go away to my own space. I can't put this aside because it's a personal issue between me and this kid here. If I blank the kid out, I pay a heavy price for living in that environment, because there is a tension there, a coldness, a gulf. | Acknowledges inevitability of dealing with children's issues in his life world; avoidance results in emotional distance within the stepfamily | Necessity of dealing with children's issues in stepfamily formation
Avoidance creates emotional distance |
| 15. | Even when people are trying to bridge it (the gulf) it's hard because there's so much suspicion, my insecurity, the kid's, my wife's. For me, what I had to do was just come to terms or just acknowledge how frightened I am a lot of the time. I'm insecure. | Feels insecure; senses insecurity of others in stepfamily as an impediment to risking emotional closeness | Fear and insecurity as obstacles to dialogue |
| 16. | I've found somebody I think I want to be around for a long time. I don't want to lose that and have to be in a situation of looking for another person. | Wants to be with his partner; fears loss of this relationship | Fears loss of love, being out of this relationship |
| 17. | What I have even now with this person, there are a lot of difficulties, and what I'm learning is that people can be incredibly strong in certain areas of their personality and yet be just defenseless, almost utterly vulnerable in other areas where people can push buttons and I don't think I understood that until recently. | Values his partner; has learned of his own and her vulnerability in spite of strong personalities | Values partner
Awareness of vulnerability |
| 18. | What is an absolute non-issue for me is a mega-crisis for the other person just in terms of saying either yes or no. | Sees choices that are easy for him are problematic for his partner | Awareness of different experiences of shared situations |
| 19. | The advantage you have in the first marriage is that you are both still relatively virginal, and you're still creating your own history. Whereas, in the second one or in subsequent relationships, it's always having to start dealing with additional baggage that each person may have picked up. | Idealizes first marriage as a "virginal" time, creating history; devalues subsequent relationships for "baggage" carried forward from the past | No prior history in first marriage
Difficulty in stepfamily formation |

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| 20. To the extent that we use power over other people we are less in relationship to them. Relationship growth always means giving up something which hurts, and struggle. It really is an incredible test to be put in with somebody else's family. | Feels using power over others weakens his relationship; equates growth with struggle and pain; feels tested in the stepfamily | Relinquishing power. Growth through adversity |
| 21. An unhappy mother, someone who's unhappy about the way that the guy is getting on with her kids, is like having dynamite under the foundations. | Feels threatened in his primary relationship by conflict with stepchildren | Mother/child enmeshment |
| 22. If she feels that you are really making an effort to relate to the little snots, (laughter) no, I just say that so I don't sound too much like a bleeding heart, you know, but if you are making an effort, and she sees that, that might change, or that might begin certain changes in the relationship. | Feels conflict between being a "tough guy" and a "bleeding heart"; sees partner valuing his effort relating to her children | Values his partner's approval of his awareness of need for compassion |
| 23. It might make you feel really good and just change your whole outlook if you look into the face of another human being and you feel that little charge of empathy run through you when you look at the cute little "blank" and you say, "Ohh!", and there's a moment of compassion and you realize what it is to be an other or a child. | Recognizes his own humanity in contact with his partner's children | Compassion |
| 24. I'm just using that phrase "little blank" facetiously. Really, to underscore the point that they're not little snots. | Feels discomfort with his "tough guy" persona in relation to stepchildren | Ambivalence about stepchildren |
| 25. I think though that our kids do get that way where they play these little games with + parent and they get into manipulative things and giving your partner shit when you're not there. | Recognizes his own child's manipulative behaviors in the stepfamily | Manipulation by children |
| 26. I felt like a school principal with kids tattling to me all the time. I was caught in the middle. | Feels caught in the middle of disputes between children | Discomfort dealing with conflict |
| 27. Many times I thought I should get the kids together and say, "Look, she says you're being an asshole. You say you're being an angel. What's happening?" | Formulates but does not act on confrontational solutions to children's disputes | Avoiding confrontation |
| 28. Kids are very good at giving the needle to the sort of outsider parent. And they have their way. | Feels vulnerable to pain inflicted by stepchildren | Vulnerability to stepchildren's pressure |
| 29. It's not that you're just a visitor. You're a hostile visitor in the camp. | Sees the stepfamily as partisan; feels hostility from other "camp" | Division within stepfamily
Vulnerability to stepchildren
Stepparent is an outsider |
| 30. It's a paradox that women want a powerful man, but they also want a man who is tender and empathic and gentle and loving, you know. | Confused about what women (his partner) want(s) from men (him) | Confusion about partner's wants/needs for strength/compassion |

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| 31. Most of us who get left for another man ask, "Why did she take up with that jerk?" Maybe what it suggests is that we're missing the point, that we're choosing to say, "Well, look at all the things I am. Aren't these things great? And not addressing the fact that there's maybe something missing and which is quite crucial and we're not willing to look at it. | Resents loss of love in previous relationships; recognizes that he has "blind spots" and can be resistant to change | Increased awareness of own intra-psychic dynamics |
| 32. Women, generally not just the woman I'm with, have very romantic fantasies, like, they're great believers in love and emotion and they operate on that level in a way that most men don't. | Recognizes differences in emotional expression between himself and his partner; generalizes these to other men and women | Men's and women's different ways of relating |
| 33. Every time I'm in some sort of a logical standoff with my partner, I have to think, "Well, this person on the other side of the argument is a woman and women don't necessarily take well to logic and cognitive analysis all the time. | Struggles to engage partner on common ground; frustrated by women's more emotional style of communication | Struggle for common ground
Vulnerable to emotionality in communication with women |
| 34. When she (his partner's child) misbehaves I just say, "Look, if you're going to be with us, there are some things I just want to get straight with you. That when we go out if we don't do everything just the way you'd like it doesn't mean you can whine and complain". Then, if they make the whole thing a real downer, then maybe next time you don't take them. | Provides leadership in stepfamily situations; sets expectations and criteria for behavior that will be rewarded or punished | Stepparent as leader/ authority
Behavioral approach to stepparenting |
| 35. Kids are very vulnerable. They are very easily hurt. Just as easily as they are hurt, they are also easy to please and make a connection with. | Identifies with stepchildren's emotional openness and vulnerability | Identifies his own needs with those of his stepchildren |
| 36. I felt hurt when I felt I had connected with the kids and then they wouldn't even say "Good morning", to me. | Feels hurt and disappointed when stepchildren break emotional contact | Hurt and disappointed by stepchildren |
| 37. My partner is always harping on, and I agree, that the attitude of love is important. | Expresses some ambivalence about his partner's view of love | Love doesn't conquer all |
| 38. So, I'm always looking at the children as being little pains in the ass, which quite often they are, being self-centered, selfish, and trampling over other people's space. They're that way because they've been permitted to do that. It's all they know. But under all of that, there's a being that's probably not too bad at all. | Ambivalent about stepchildren, valuing their essential being while annoyed with their behavior | Ambivalent feeling about stepchildren |
| 39. It's hard giving the benefit of the doubt to the kids. The mother sees it (their essential goodness). She sees them as perfect, even with their warts and all. | Acknowledges his difficulty in seeing the stepchildren charitably; feels his partner overvalues them | Critical perception of stepchildren
Clash of values |

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| 40. | It's frustrating. I like to stay up late when I feel like it. With my way of working, if I do want to work, then I like to have control of my environment. Even their mother expresses frustration at times at how noisy it is when the kids are in the house. The noise isn't intolerable, but it's disruptive. | Frustrated by the lack of control in his environment; shares his partner's frustration with her children's disruptive activities | Need to control environment
Shares partner's frustration with her children |
| 41. | I had my own place for nearly fifteen years, and a number of relationships. | Recalls his independence in past relationships | Values his independence
Control |
| 42. | The kids cling to that old structure (the intact nuclear family), and so does their mother. It's as if there's hardly been a divorce, because now dad's living around the corner and there's a guy living in the house. | Feels an outsider as his partner and her children cling to their former nuclear family structure | Stepparent as outsider
Nuclear family enmeshment |
| 43. | I realized that this (relationship with his stepchildren) had to be made to work, because the mother is so anxious about the stepchildren, that unless she's feeling fairly comfortable about the whole situation, that will affect the primary relationship. | Feels doomed in his primary relationship if his relationship with stepchildren does not work out | Stepchildren and primary relationship interdependent |
| 44. | I assumed that the other person would see things pretty much the way that I did, and that there wouldn't be too much difficulty in working out some strategies and some ideas. I saw it as just basically problem solving, no sweat. | Realizes his assumptions about stepfamily situations do not fit for his partner | His cognitive view differs from his partner's views |
| 45. | What I found in practice was that the other person was just not seeing the data, what I thought were the data, in the same way at all. | Realizes stepfamily situations are subjective interpretations, differing between him and his partner | Subjective differences in interpretation of relationship data |
| 46. | She saw my modus operandi as- if not the wrong way to go, missing the point. I interpreted her foot dragging as a vested interest in keeping things just as they were. | Misunderstood or interpreted as wrong by his partner; resents her resistance to change | Feels misunderstood
Resistance to change |
| 47. | There's a real unwillingness to look at what's going on, and exhortations to go forth and love one another and be kind to one another and everything will fall into place. I see this sort of approach as being very naive and in a way, a rationalization for not really dealing with the issues. | Resents his partner's avoidance of issues by glossing over them | Avoidance of issue:
Criticism of exhortations for change |
| 48. | You know you have to get into the nitty gritty and work with concrete behaviors and build that atmosphere and gradually develop rapport, because as you solve little problems, trust and confidence builds and then a love relationship can come. | Takes a conditional approach to love, based on trust and confidence developed through resolution of "nitty gritty" issues | Pragmatic vs Romantic approach to family relationships |
| 49. | Whereas my partner's view was, as an adult, you are responsible for creating such a loving and understanding environment that the children will come to you, just as a wild animal will suddenly become tame and come to you and lick your hand in the jungle. To me, that was just totally unrealistic. | Condemns partner's view that "love" conquers all as unrealistic | Clash of values |

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| 50. The best I could do was a fairly neutral but a very fair approach, trying to be aware of my own irritations, but to keep them under wraps long enough to get down and work through some problems. | Represses real feelings of irritation while problem solving | Withholding negative feelings |
| 51. You know from prior experience that must suspend judgement and wrestle with those negative reactions and give the other person a chance, and your... and then when you work that way, quite often a good relationship comes. | Withholds negative feelings in an attempt to come to a satisfactory resolution | Withholding negative feelings |
| 52. It's easy for the mother to rush in and so-called "rescue" her children from her male companion. But in doing so, she's really driving a stake into the heart of the relationship. | Feels damaged by his partner's "rescuing" her children from him | Partner's collusion with children |
| 53. The kids will fit in to whatever is coming down the pipe. It may not be the best, but you've got to allow your partner to work out their own relationship in their own way. That's hard for an anxious mother who is so worried that more than anything else, she wants those kids to relate to you as if you were their birth father. | Longs to relate to his stepchildren in his own way | Seeking authentic relationships with stepchildren
Mother's enmeshment with children
Stepparent as an outsider |
| 54. Difficulties I've had in this family situation have really led me back to a lot of unresolved issues in my own past. I really value my parenting experience, and I think it's still one of the greatest things that happened to me. But, I've never been one of those people who goes ga-ga or potty over kids, to the point where I just want to devote my life to hovering over my children. | Feels vulnerable to issues from his own past raised in stepfamily context; values his parenting experience; acknowledges limits in his willingness to accommodate children | Vulnerability to unresolved personal issues
Learning in the stepfamily
Awareness of attitude to children |
| 55. It seemed like when I was living there the house was like a revolving door, with kids coming in and then they'd be off again to a friend's house. So that ideal of the family around the table is not happening anyway. | Reality of the stepfamily does not fit his or his partner's ideal | Reality of stepfamily does not fulfill ideal of nuclear family |
| 56. Sometimes I wonder, because it seems that no matter how much of an effort I make, I'm always falling short and being judged, as if I was not making any effort, when in fact I'm trying very hard. | Discouraged by lack of recognition for his efforts with his stepchildren | Need for recognition by partner |
| 57. I'm often in the position of competing with the children for her time. And there can be a certain amount of retroactive blaming of me for "I'm here with you and you put this pressure on me to be here and although I love being here with you and having a great time, but somehow or other I'd like it better if we were as just one big happy family". | Resents not feeling worthy of his partner's attention and her blaming him for wanting to be part of her ideal family | Partner's fantasy of the nuclear family |
| 58. I don't think at my age I should have to be fitting in with these children. They are younger and more resilient probably more capable of adjusting in their behavior to fit in with me than vice versa. | Resents having to change to fit into existing family structure, rather than having children change to accommodate him | Resents expectation of change
Onus on children to change |

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| 59. Sometimes I think that young children are so spoiled and so entertained that it's difficult for them to change in their behavior. Most of the time they do as they please and they tolerate the occasional tantrum from a parent when they don't do as they're told. | Resents stepchildren's resistance to compliance | Resents stepchildren's narcissism |
| 60. It's painful when you get into a real relationship. I've had a few relationships of convenience, and that's why at this point in my life I'm prepared to put more energy into this to try to make it work than I've put into anything. | Values his primary relationship and feels pained by his efforts to make it work | Need for love and acceptance
Pain in conflict |
| 61. I've been tempted to walk away and say "To hell with it" so many times. I could be out of here and free and dating another woman in a couple of months and developing another relationship. And then I think it wouldn't offer the the things that I have in this one, especially in terms of the capacity of the partner to work on a real relationship. | Resists the temptation to walk away from his primary relationship because he values it | Commitment
Need for love and acceptance |
| 62. It is so incredibly painful when you start hurting each other and getting into destructive patterns when you just react and then you get into this horrible dance where you're shitting on each other back and forth. | Feels hurt and horrified by destructive patterns in the primary relationship | Destructive patterns of anger |
| 63. You really need help when you can't even sit down to talk, because the moment you start to talk, like saying "Let's sit down and talk", that might be an issue because you've got the power, and she's dis-empowered and already one down and irritated because you started. So you can't get off the ground, let alone fly anywhere. | Feels helpless in the power struggles arising with his partner | Struggle for power |
| 64. When you get into the heavy sledding of a relationship, you have to start really dealing with all kinds of crap that goes back to your childhood that never in your life had you been aware of. | Feels vulnerable to his unresolved life issues brought to the surface by stepfamily conflicts | Vulnerability to unresolved personal issues
Learning in the stepfamily |
| 65. In my case, I want a woman who will give me a kind of nurturing and mothering. For me, the image is always laying my head on a warm ample bosom. That's a very maternal kind of thing. | Longs for warmth and comfort ("mothering") from his partner | Need for his partner's love and acceptance |
| 66. But these warm nurturing types, in my case, are maybe looking for a decisive independent type who says, "I don't give a shit what all those other people are saying, this is my course, away I go." And, they find that very compelling as well, and they want more of that. | Feels valued for his decisiveness and independence | Valued by his partner |
| 67. Because they're very nurturing they're also unable to commit their resources exclusively to one thing, so they're much more scattered. | Feels a sense of loss as his partner's nurturing extends to others | Need for partner's nurturing |

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| 68. (Re: commitment) Part of who I am is that I made a decision, I'm going to do it with this, and I'm in until I'm either pushed off or shaken off. As far as I know, I'm going to hang in there and make it work. | Clings to his relationship as an act of commitment | Need for love and acceptance
Commitment |
| 69. I sold my house and went into partnership and landscaped the yard and put a lot of sweat equity into that. And in the final analysis it was as if that wasn't as important to my partner as a whole lot of other interpersonal things. | Resents the lack of recognition by his partner for his "sweat equity" in their home | Need for recognition
Clash of values |
| 70. She didn't see this kind of commitment in terms of sweat equity as being significant as I did. I thought I had almost literally broken my back laboring toward that end. To me, that was evidence of an extremely strong commitment. | Disappointed that his partner does not recognize his physical effort as commitment | Need for recognition
Clash of values |
| 71. If a woman isn't doing the work, there's no way that she understands how much of you is expressed in that work and how difficult it is to just sort of walk away as if you were a carpenter doing the job for money. | Feels his partner discounts the value he attaches to his physical work | Need for recognition
Clash of values |
| 72. I feel safer now that I'm in my own house, even though I've had to take out a mortgage. And I feel that whatever goes on in my house, I only have myself to blame. | Withdraws to the safety of independent living | Withdrawal
Security in independence |
| 73. When I saw the kids sort of bumping the basketball around and knocking the ceiling tiles loose in the basement and marking the walls it would make me uptight, because I was weary of building that stuff and maintaining it. When I'd tell the kids not to do it, I was put in the light of being a shit-head, a grouch who's so uptight about everything that you can't hardly move in the house and he's on your case. | Feels caught between protecting his investment of work and being labelled as a grouch | Resents lack of support from partner |
| 74. They (the kids) were scared to move. That's what their mother sees. Jesus, you terrorize the kids. They don't want to be in the house. They want to stay with their dad, they're so uncomfortable in this house. | Resents his partner's labelling him as a "bad guy" and her former husband as a "good guy" | Discomfort with perjorative labelling by partner
Presence of partner's ex-spouse |
| 75. My experience with my partner is that when I'm pissed off with something and I discuss it with her that she thought she was doing what seemed to be what I wanted, given the way I'd been behaving. | His anger is often misinterpreted by his partner unless he discusses underlying issues with her | Misunderstanding arising from negative feelings |
| 76. I have my own style of setting up my living space. When I lie there in bed looking up at all the pictures of her parents and kids staring down at me it really makes me uncomfortable. I feel like I'm in an atmosphere that makes me uncomfortable. | Feels uncomfortable with prominent reminders of his partner's family in her living space | Need to establish new environment |
| 77. I can handle maybe a couple of photographs, maybe in the living room or somewhere, but right there on the wall over the bed. | Longs for an intimate space to share in his partner's home | Needs to feel special to partner
Need to control environment |

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| 78. Women go back into the nostalgia. My partner's favorite metaphor is "Sophie's Choice". She says that she always has to choose between me and the children. | Feels powerless to affect his partner's perception of having to choose between him and her children | Partner's nostalgia. Feels like an outsider |
| 79. She has this tremendous anxiety and guilt about her children after leaving her marriage. She overcompensates by almost throwing herself on the railway tracks everyday for her kids. She punishes herself and me because the kids get so used to this kind of treatment that they don't even know that it's extraordinary treatment. | Feels punished by his partner's guilt about leaving her marriage | Punished by partner's guilt |
| 80. My partner is hooked into her family of origin and for me that is another competitor for her time. | Resents competing with his partner's family of origin for her time | Competition for attention |
| 81. They (her family of origin) a part of her past where I don't exist. And, I haven't been particularly included in relating to that family in the present, so I've felt very excluded. | Feels excluded from his partner's family of origin, both in the past and present | Exclusion as an outsider |
| 82. When she takes off to spend several days with all of her family in the cottage of her former husband to celebrate her son's birthday, I feel extremely squelched out. I feel just a total rage that she could be there with this guy that she's divorced, celebrating this birthday. It's almost like nothing happened, except now mom has this guy that's kind of out there in the parking lot. | Enraged when his partner excludes him and spends time with her former husband and his family | Partner's unresolved issues with ex-spouse
Anger
Feeling discounted |
| 83. You know that the family is always looking at you in a judgmental way, comparing you to the guy- that nice guy who was there for so many years and she went and got rid of him and now there's this other guy, who...He's okay, but I really liked the first guy. | Feels judged and unworthy in the eyes of his partner's family; resents comparison to his partner's former husband | Kept as an outsider. Impact of partner's ex-spouse
Past impinges on present |
| 84. "This intruder doesn't wear very nice clothing and he let's his woman pay half the bill when they go out. Jesus, this guy has no class at all." | Feels insecure with perception he interprets his partner's family having of him | Vulnerability as an outsider |
| 85. She hasn't organized much, apart from her family. She says she feels out of touch with the people she knew before, and I pick up a note of indirect blaming me for that. | Sees himself as the scapegoat for his partner's distancing herself from her former friends | Scapegoat for partner's social distancing |
| 86. I say, "Look, I've introduced you to quite a few of my friends and I try to include you and try to invite you to come for a beer or over to my house if I'm having people over, and I've done my best to make you part of my life as much as I can. How come you're not doing this with me?" I feel like I'm the crazy member of the family who's kept in a room. | Doubts himself when his partner does not include him socially; feels cheated by her lack of reciprocity | Self doubt
Feeling cheated
Stigmatized relationship |
| 87. It's like she thinks there's something wrong with me. I find that's very hard to tolerate because I know that there are quite a number of people who have a contrary view. | Withholds the anger he feels about being accepted by others while discounted by his partner | Withholding anger
Feeling discounted |

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| 88. When I know it's going to be one of those bummer evenings, I take the party with me and laugh at all the horse shit they talk about. When you're a loner, a lone wolf you know how to do that, even though you're bored shitless. | Withdraws into the role of a "lone wolf" in the presence of his partner's friends who bore him | Withdrawal for security
Clash of values |
| 89. Making meaningful contact with this new person's social world as well as with the world of their children is like our world's in collision. | Feels reluctant to take on the magnitude of adjustments called for in joining his partner's social world. | Difficulty in stepfamily formation |
| 90. The scam that she had to perpetuate was that her husband was much more competent than he really was. He's the prototypic bed-wetter who craps out in the clutch. He's had a million opportunities and he's fucked them all up. | Resents the historical presence of his partner's former husband | Presence of partner's ex-spouse |
| 91. I'd rather be out in the bush in rough clothes working on a project or fishing or something just kind of less formal and less mannered than that social world. | Identifies his activity interests in nature, work or solitude, as distinctly separate from his partner's social circle | Differing values from his partner |
| 92. In this society, I stand out as being far too outspoken. So, I have quite a few problems in that area. They also carry over into the bedroom, where I have a somewhat macabre sense of humor. | Feels insecure about his outspoken manner of relating publicly and privately | Insecurity
Clash of values
Outsider |
| 93. I feel like I live at a boarding house rather than part of a family, having to fight for my rights and my space and being over run by the activities of other members of the family, notably the children | Feels he does not fit in the family and the children's activities do not fit in his life | Difficulty in stepfamily formation
Outsider |
| 94. What really bothered me was the way in which the kids acted as if they had been used to having unrestricted access to any part of the house, so that for them running and bumping and yelling, just doing normal kid kind of things, was for me, very disruptive. | Feels violated by lack of structure in the home | Need for control of environment |
| 95. There was a very strong effort on the part of my partner to maintain as much of the old structure of what had existed in their family as possible. | Sees his partner clinging to her former nuclear family structure in the stepfamily | Partner clings to nuclear family form |
| 96. The kids saw their father just about every weekend, and the only time I really saw them or had most to do with was during the school week. During that time they were very busy with soccer, basketball, gymnastics, dancing, badminton, etc. I felt there was very little space in all of that activity for me to get something going with the kids. | Feels closed out of a relationship with the children by their activities and frequent contact with their father | Impact of stepchildren's father
Stepparent as an outsider |
| 97. One of the things that hurt me was the way the children would come and go and ignore me, totally ignore me. It wasn't a kind of deliberate, pointed ignoring, it was more like I was just not there. | Feels hurt and experiences self doubt as a result of stepchildren's not acknowledging him | Hurt by stepchildren
Self doubt
Outsider |
| 98. When I was talking to my partner, they had the right to step in and stop things at any moment, and this caused friction between me and my partner. | Resents intrusion of stepchildren into personal space; feels angry with his partner for not imposing boundaries | Need for boundaries
Conflict on children's issues |

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| 99. I think my partner saw me as being much more firm in my views about discipline- too firm I saw her as being too indulgent. | Experiences conflict with his partner over differing views of parenting practices | Conflict on children's issues
Clash of values |
| 100. I had the difficulty of seeing lots of incidents where I thought my partner was reinforcing inappropriate behavior. When I pointed it out, it only added more stress. | Feels caught between frustration of withholding opinions and creating stress in the relationship by expressing them | Withholding negative feelings
Stress related to parenting issues |
| 101. What I thought were just common sense suggestions about parenting were met with feelings of guilt and anger. | Feels he is the unfair target of his partner's guilt and anger when he expresses his views on parenting | Anger
Clash of values on parenting |
| 102. I spent quite a bit of money on behavior modification type manuals, tapes and programs. and my partner only gave it luke warm assent, so it never did develop. She would reinforce them just to be nice to them rather than waiting until they did something helpful or constructive. There seemed to be a huge amount of resistance to this and it developed into a power struggle between us. | Feels unappreciated for his efforts toward what he sees as more satisfactory parenting practices; a power struggle develops between them around parenting issues | Need for acknowledgement
Power struggles in parenting |
| 103. I think her style was one that she was habitually used to, which was pleasing people and reinforcing non-contingent behavior. | Experiences his partner is a "pleaser"; disagrees with her parenting style | Clash of values in parenting
Difficulties in stepfamily formation |
| 104. I've often felt that I didn't have a place where I could just get away and enjoy a sort of protected environment. The study was underneath the kitchen and the laundry room so it was quite noisy a lot of the time. I worked under great frustration a lot of the time. | Feels frustrated by intrusion of stepfamily activities into his world of work | Need to control environment
Difficulties in stepfamily formation |
| 105. It really bothered me that when the children were assigned jobs they would not do them or not do them properly. When they were done, my partner hailed the children as though they had been to outer space and back. It was just ridiculous. | Feels angered by his partner's reinforcement of children's poorly completed tasks | Clash of values in parenting
Frustration with stepchildren |
| 106. I fell into the role of being the policeman, noticing how the children hadn't done what they were supposed to do. This caused a lot of friction between my partner and I. | Experiences conflict with his partner when he expresses negative opinions about her children | Clash of values in parenting
Conflict over parenting |
| 107. I had a choice of not saying anything about what I could see happening in front of me. I found this very difficult. Even when I didn't say anything, my partner could read my body language and tell when I was upset. | Feels caught in a no-win situation about expressing or withholding his frustration with stepchildren's behavior | Expression of negative feelings creates conflict
Difficulties in stepfamily formation |
| 108. I saw the kids learning to see us as chauffeurs and chefs and care givers that really didn't put out our needs and let the kids know what we needed and remind them fairly frequently of their responsibilities and make some of their pleasurable activities contingent upon those responsibilities. | Feels unappreciated by his stepchildren for efforts to support their activities; fears his own needs will be overlooked in favor of theirs | Need for appreciation
Need for acceptance
Parenting |

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| 109. I know my partner saw me focussing on the negative, being extremely critical, and not giving the love and support they needed. | Feels condemned by his partner for expressing negative views about her children | Negative views create conflict |
| 110. Her view was that if, as adults we were to create a kind of atmosphere of love and understanding and tolerance in the household, that the other problems would take care of themselves. I tried to explain to her that no matter how benevolent we were, certain behaviors needed to be developed and shaped and if we provided a strong reinforcement for those, they would feel better and there would be better relations among all of us | Feels caught in a trade off between his partner's view of unconditional love for her children and his view of only reinforcing desirable behaviors | Clash of values in parenting
Love conquers all vs. behaviourism
Difficulties in stepfamily formation |
| 111. I feel that we were both extremely naive in terms of our expectations. We really didn't know what we were getting into, but I feel in retrospect that to expect that somehow I could be transplanted into what was largely the remains of the former family structure, that was unrealistic. | Feels vulnerable recognizing the daunting task of creating a new family form | Vulnerability seeing naivety
Difficulty in stepfamily formation |
| 112. The children didn't need my support, because they had their mother and their father and they had all their friends, they had all their life at school and their various organizations, so I felt basically redundant. | Feels unwanted and unneeded "redundant" in the lives of his stepchildren | Stepparent as an outsider |
| 113. Any suggestions I made, obviously were suggestions about changing the status quo and were viewed, I think, critically, and as a threat. | Ambivalence about wanting to make changes in the stepfamily, but not wanting to be seen as a threat | Nuclear family resistance to change |
| 114. I had a tremendous feeling of insecurity. I felt that most of our options- what she and I could do, could at any moment be reined in or challenged by what was happening in the lives of the children. And because the father was involved he had a lot of power over the pattern of our day to day existence. | Feels vulnerable to whimsical exercise of power by his partner's children | Stepchildren's power as a threat |
| 115. Decisions made about what the kids would be doing were made between my partner and her former husband. I was only told afterward. I wasn't even the picture. I wasn't even consulted. | Feels an outsider to decisions made concerning children's activities | Stepparent as an outsider
Presence of partner's ex-spouse |
| 116. Her former husband would phone and say that something had happened so he couldn't have the kids and then we'd have to change our plans. I was very resentful of this, because I thought here's this guy who basically wants me out of here, still able to jerk me and my partner around by manipulating the children. | Feels vulnerable to manipulation by decisions of his partner's former husband affecting the children | Effects of partner's ex-spouse |
| 117. He was always such a nice guy who was just being so benign. And I thought that her attitude was so naive, perhaps motivated by guilt and the need to feel that, although she'd left him she would make it a little easier by being ever so nice to him. That just made our situation more painful. | Feels pained by his partner's emotional hook into her relationship with her former husband | Pain from partner's unresolved past issues |

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| 118. I was much more in favor of a clean break, just letting the former spouse know in unequivocal terms that it's over, it's finished. | Feels vulnerable to his partner's lack of resolution in relation to her former husband | Partner's unresolved issues from past |
| 119. I think that I had to deal with the unresolved residue of a marriage, as well as a lot of stuff that came out of my partner's family. | Feels daunted by the complexity of his partner's psychological makeup | Daunted by partner's psychological complexity |
| 120. What her family, neighbors and other thought about our relationship was very influential on my partner. That caused me a lot of pain. I felt that she was ashamed of her relationship with me. It made me feel excluded, that there was something terribly bad about what we were doing and it had to be hidden. | Feels pained by his partner's vulnerability to public opinion about their relationship; doubts himself and the legitimacy of their relationship | Self doubt
Need for public acceptance of stepfamily relationship |
| 121. I still feel insecure and angry about the way I'm still being sort of kept under wraps as a secret project that's going on, and she doesn't want to go public, just in case it doesn't work out. I feel this is a very dishonest approach to our relationship. | Feels insecure and angry about his partner's lack of public commitment to their relationship | Need for reciprocity in commitment |
| 122. One day I was having a conversation with her son. She interrupted our conversation and short circuited many of my questions and told me more or less how to interpret her son in relation to the questions I was asking him. Even if I'm bumbling all over the place, this is my relationship with him and it has to take its own course. | Experiences his partner as interfering in his attempts to develop relationships with her children | Seeking authentic relationships with stepchildren
Mother interferes |
| 123. I've often felt that I was being used as the scapegoat for my partner's guilt. When we're together it's as though she feels she's taking something from the children which should be theirs and giving it to me. | Feels he is a scapegoat for his partner's guilt; longs to feel worthy of her attention | Scapegoat for partner's guilt
Feeling unworthy |
| 124. Certain behaviors of the kids bug her as much as they bug me. Sometimes I think she uses me as an excuse just to avoid dealing with the kids. | Feels he is a scapegoat for his partner's frustration with her children | Scapegoat for partner's frustration |
| 125. How much do I have the right to indulge my neurosis about noise and my own space? Am I being totally narcissistic, or is this understandable and certainly a common human response? | Experiences self doubt about the legitimacy of meeting his own needs | Doubt about meeting his own needs |

Table 4
Higher Order Thematic Descriptions of James' Stepfamily Experience

Thematic Clusters	Generalized Descriptions
1. Feelings of Vulnerability (3, 11, 15, 16, 28, 29, 30, 36, 43, 46, 56, 57, 60, 65, 67, 68, 69, 70, 71, 73, 84, 85, 86, 87, 88, 92, 97, 102, 108, 114, 116, 117, 118, 120, 121, 123, 124, 125,)	Resents having to compete for his partner's attention; values their relationship and feels pained by efforts to make it work; longs for warmth and comfort ("mothering") from his partner; feels a sense of loss as her nurturing extends to others; resists the temptation to walk away from relationship; feels committed in spite of problems; confused about his partner's need for a powerful or gentle man; resents partner's lack of recognition for his "sweat equity" in their home; disappointed she does not recognize his physical effort as commitment; feels discounted for value he attaches to physical work; withdraws into "lone wolf" when bored in the presence of partner's friends; feels insecure about his outspoken manner of relating in the relationship; feels hurt and experiences self-doubt when stepchildren don't acknowledge him; feels unappreciated for his efforts toward developing more satisfactory parenting practices, and by his stepchildren for his efforts to support their activities; fears his needs will be overlooked in favor of those of others; feels pained by his partner's vulnerability to public opinion about their relationship; insecure and angry about her lack of public commitment to the legitimacy of their relationship;
2. Learning and Personal Growth (2, 4, 17, 20, 23, 31, 33, 35, 44, 45, 64)	Survived and has grown from loss suffered in divorce; acknowledges ideal of nurturing in ideal relationship, but recognizes reality of pain and his own imperfection in parenting; recognizes his own humanity through contact with stepchildren; identifies with their vulnerability and emotional openness; stepfamily situations present both his own and his partner's strengths and vulnerabilities; stepfamily struggles "test" him; equates growth with struggle and pain; recognizes his subjective interpretations of stepfamily situations differ from his partner's; recognizes he has blind spots but that he is resistant to change; struggles to engage his partner on common ground of logic; realizes his assumptions do not always fit with hers; sees stepfamily situations open to subjective interpretation; stepfamily issues activate unresolved issues from his past;

3. Need for Independence and Control of Environment
(6, 7, 11, 40, 41, 66, 72, 76, 77, 91, 94, 104)

Transition from a predictable single life to the many activities of a stepfamily is difficult; shares his partner's frustration with high level of activity in their home; feels uncomfortable with prominent reminders of his partner's family in her home; lack of structure in her home leaves him feeling violated; feels frustrated by intrusion of stepfamily activities into his work space; sets up independent financial security on a contingency basis; feels vulnerable to his partner's ability to "screw up" his plans; values the independence he has learned in past relationships; feels safer living independently; values independent and solitary activities apart from his partner's social circle; feels valued for his decisiveness and independence;

4. Stepparent as an Outsider
(8, 28, 42, 53, 74, 78, 81, 82, 83, 84, 85, 86, 96, 112, 115)

Feeling "isolated", "abandoned", an "outsider" are basic issues in his stepfamily relationships; feels vulnerable to stepchildren "needling" him as an outsider; experiences partisanship and hostility from stepchildren; feels shut out as his partner and her children "cling" to structure of their former nuclear family; he longs to relate to stepchildren in his own way, not as their birth father; resents partner labelling him as the "bad guy" and children's father as the "good guy"; feels excluded by but powerless to affect his partner's perception of having to choose between him and her children; feels excluded from his partner's family of origin, historically and in the present; enraged when his partner excludes him and spends time with her former nuclear family, including her former husband; feels judged and unworthy in the eyes of his partner's family of origin; resents their comparisons of him with her former husband; doubts himself when his partner does not include him socially, and cheated by her lack of social reciprocity; feels "redundant", closed out of stepchildren's world by their activities and frequent contacts with their father; feels left out of decision making re: children's activities

5. Dealing with Conflict

(10, 12, 13, 26, 27, 47, 50, 51, 62, 63, 73, 75, 87, 101, 100, 106, 107, 109)

Withholds strong feelings in order to "stay cool" and work out compromises; experiences "moral justification" in differing views; feels an anger in couple's discussions greater than warranted by issues; recognizes angry exchanges as a habit with destructive potential; feels helpless in power struggles arising with partner; Uncomfortable dealing with conflict between stepchildren; feels "like a policeman" enforcing standards re: children's duties; formulates but withholds confrontational interventions in stepchildren's conflicts; withholds anger when he feels discounted by his partner; resents his partner avoiding issues by glossing over them; represses feelings of irritation while problem solving; choices that are easy for him are difficult for his partner; experiences conflict with partner when discussing parenting issues and feels he is the unfair target of her guilt and anger; withholds negative reactions in an attempt to come to a satisfactory solution; feels hurt and horrified by destructive patterns of anger with his partner; with stepchildren, feels caught between protecting his investment of work and being labelled a grouch; feels his anger is often misinterpreted; feels caught in a no-win situation between frustration of withholding negative opinions and creating stress in the relationship by expressing them; feels condemned by his partner for expressing critical views about her children

6. Difficulties in Stepfamily Formation

(5, 14, 19, 21, 25, 32, 33, 37, 46, 49, 52, 55, 63, 79, 80, 82, 84, 89, 90, 93, 95, 98, 99, 102, 103, 105, 111, 113, 119, 123, 124)

Acknowledges a double standard between parenting and stepparenting; conflict with stepchildren threatens his primary relationship; his partner sees his discipline as too firm, he sees hers as too indulgent; his negative feedback results in conflict with his partner; he feels caught in a trade-off between his conditional approach and his partner's unconditional approach to affirming her children; struggles to find common ground for discussions with partner; dealing with children's issues seems inevitable, and avoiding them creates emotional distance from partner; experiences his partner as having romantic fantasie about family; stepfamily realities do not fit the ideal of family; "baggage" carried forward from both partners' past relationships interferes with stepfamily development; his view of love differs from that of his partner; feels misunderstood by his partner; resents her resistance to changing the family form, thinks his partner's view that "love conquers all" is unrealistic; his partner's "rescuing" her children damages his relationship with them; feels helpless in power struggles arising with her; feels punished by her guilt about leaving her marriage; resents competing with his partner's family of origin for her time; reluctant to take on the magnitude of change called for in joining his partner's social world;

6. Difficulties in stepfamily formation
(cont'd)

resents the historical presence of his partner's former husband; feels he does not fit into the family's activities and their activities do not fit into his; sees his partner clinging to the structure of the former nuclear family; resents the intrusion of stepchildren into his personal space and feels angry with his partner for not imposing boundaries; disagrees with his partner's parenting style; feels vulnerable recognizing the daunting task of creating a new family form; ambivalent about wanting to make changes in the stepfamily form but not wanting to be perceived as a threat; daunted by the complexity of his partner's psychological makeup; feels he is a scapegoat for his partner's frustration and guilt; feels unappreciated by his partner for his efforts toward what he sees as more satisfactory parenting practices, and by his stepchildren for his efforts to support their activities;

7. Ambivalence in Relation to his
Stepchildren
(1, 22, 34, 38, 39, 48, 54, 58, 59, 73,
108)

Discouraged when partner discounts his efforts with her children; his approval of them is conditional upon their behavior; experiences conflict between persona of "tough guy" and "bleeding heart"; often presents "tough guy" persona in relation to stepchildren; acknowledges difficulty seeing stepchildren charitably; resents their resistance to compliance with adult expectations; seeks authentic relationships with his stepchildren; experiences their mother as interfering with these; resentment about feeling an outsider prevents him from reaching out to others in the stepfamily; operates in a leadership fashion, setting criteria for stepchildren's behavior/inclusion;

An Integrated Paraphrase of James' Experience of a Stepfamily

James' experience in a stepfamily is characterized by feelings of vulnerability and ambivalence. His unfulfilled longing for emotional warmth and nurturing from his partner activate life-long issues of isolation and abandonment. The nurturing support he seeks points out a struggle for change and growth which James identifies as painful. James resents competing for a place in his partner's life and experiences a sense of loss when her attention is diffused to others. He values involving his partner socially and feels cheated by her lack of reciprocity. When he is not affirmed in her family and circle of friends, he has doubts about himself. James feels discounted by his partner for his contributions of physical labor to their home and for his attempts to introduce more structured parenting practices.

James feels shut out by his partner and her children clinging to vestiges of their former nuclear family. It's past overshadows his presence in the stepfamily. As his partner's friends and extended family compare him to her former husband, James feels unfairly judged. He feels punished by his partner's guilt over leaving her former marriage. Her contacts and unresolved issues with her former spouse unsettle James. He feels excluded in the presence of prominent reminders of his partner's family of origin in her home. Feeling alienated, he withdraws emotionally .

James feels discouraged in his desire to develop relationships with his partner's children, and experiences

his partner as interfering in this process. The children's involvement with their father displace his attempts. He feels an outsider to the children's activity filled lives. James feels conflicted over presenting a "tough guy" or "bleeding heart" persona in interactions with his partner's children. While identifying with their human goodness, he expresses approval conditional upon their behavior. When his stepchildren treat him as though he is invisible, he is hurt. James feels violated by their intrusion into his personal space and vulnerable to manipulation by their prerogative to change stepfamily plans without notice. He feels emotionally distant when he and his partner do not deal with issues related to her children, and fears damaging conflict when they do.

James values his relationship with his partner and resists the temptation to walk away from it. He is confused about how the decisiveness and independence he values fit with his partner's romantic ideal of a man. He is hurt and horrified by their pattern of damaging angry exchanges. Anger between them blows out of proportion to their issues and has an intensity of moral justification. He is caught between the frustration of being misunderstood by holding back his negative feelings and risking stress in the relationship by expressing them. He recalls independent living as safer but less emotionally satisfying than living in a stepfamily.

PennyPersonal Information

Penny is a graduate student in her mid-forties. She has three school age children..She was married for about ten years. Following her divorce eight years ago, Penny "keeping busy dating and providing for her kids". She.assumed sole custody of her children and received regular financial support from their father. Her children rarely visit their father who lives in another city, and consequently spend little time apart from their mother. At the time of our interview, Penny had recently left her common-law partner after being involved in a stepfamily relationship with him for three years. Her intention was to terminate their relationship.

Excerpts from interviews with Penny are listed in the first column of Table 5. They appear in the order in which she presented them. Clusters of related themes are presented in Table 6, followed by an integrated paraphrase of her experience.

Table 5
Thematic Abstraction of Penny's Experience in a Stepfamily

Excerpts from transcribed interview	Two Levels of Abstraction	
	1. Paraphrases	2. Themes
1. We had been going out for about two and a half years, during which time I had hoped that he would develop some closeness with my children	Hopes for a close relationship between her partner and her children	Disappointed expectations for the stepfamily closeness
2. I could see from the beginning that he had different ways than I did in terms of handling the kids.	Recognizes her partner's different parenting style	Differences in parenting
3. His children were older than mine and I wasn't sure what he was like with little kids, but I got the idea that he had been very strict with his own. There was an emphasis on different things than I emphasized with mine.	Recognizes differences in partner's life cycle and parenting style	Life cycle differences from partner Differences in parenting
4. He was more interested in orderliness and rules, and in chores and assignments, and there was a rigidity that I sensed, a structure that I myself had never grown up with.	Recognizes differences in partner's priorities from those learned in her family of origin	Differences in family of origin Differences in parenting Clash of values
5. There was very little structure in our home, even though I had a really good up-bringing, whereas in his family I got the feeling that there was very much structure in his family.	Recognizes patterns of parenting based in family of origin; values her up-bringing	Parenting patterns based in family of origin Nostalgia for family of origin
6. He was raised very differently than I was, so we learned very different things to start with.	Recognizes differences learned in family of origin	Inviolate learning in family of origin
7. We thought, isn't this wonderful—we're both (of the same national heritage). But as it turned out, that was irrelevant. It was very much the way we were raised. It was obvious those things were different between us.	Recognizes differences from partner overshadow shared experiences	Differences overshadow shared experience
8. We talked about them (differences) all the time. Between the two of us there was a tremendous communication. But as we talked it became obvious that there were very different philosophies.	Communication reveals depth of differences	Communication reveals depth of differences
9. (Differences) in lots of areas would be fine. Common interests drew us together to begin with. There was lots of communication, really a lot of enjoyment of each other—one to one, the two of us, terrific relationship, very, very close. But as soon as the kids were brought into it there were always conflicts.	Common interests attract her to her partner; They communicate well and have fun as a couple; conflict arises when her children are present	Attraction to partner Positive communication as a couple Conflict centering on children
10. It seemed strange to me that two adults who cared so much about each other could get along only when the kids were not around.	Perplexed by presence of children disrupting adult relationship	Conflict centering on children
11. He would be setting down rules in my house, in the name of trying to keep order, in the name of trying to help me. He cared for me, so he wanted to help me, he wanted to get my kids to help me more.	Partner imposes structure on her children to help her through their increased order and contributions	Partner's need for control through structure

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| 12. | His intentions were good, but it always came out bad on the kids. And the children soon disliked him because we felt that he didn't have the right to come into our house and tell the kids, "Eat all your supper". | Partner's good intentions resented in "her" house | Resentment of partner's imposition of structure
Cohesiveness of single parent family |
| 13. | Meal times were terrible, because he always insisted that the children eat everything on their plates, and I hadn't. I'd been alone with my kids at this point for three years and we were quite happy with what we were doing. | Rules create terrible experiences; Single parent family resents intrusion of outsider | Resentment of partner's imposition of rule;
Cohesiveness of single parent family |
| 14. | He liked to make the meals and set the rules and would like to be boss of the house. He was hard to please, and ended up doing it all (the housework). | Partner takes control through doing household tasks | Partner's need for control |
| 15. | He did all these things for me (laundry, cooking), but he didn't do what I wanted most and that was to have a relationship with my kids. | Devalues partner's contribution as it does not meet her expectation for a close relationship with her children | Devaluing partner's contribution
Expectation for closeness |
| 16. | Kids don't appreciate that someone is doing the meals and the laundry. So it didn't build brownie points for him, and I don't think he ever understood why it didn't, why we didn't appreciate it. | Partner's contribution is not appreciated; he doesn't see why | Devaluing partner's contribution and understanding |
| 17. | It was destructive to our relationship for him not to have the gentleness, and not have the sitting time with the kids where they're just chit-chatting, but to be telling them "Put your coats away, put your boots away, it's your day on chores, it's your day for that." | Resentment of partner's directive approaches, rather than affirming ones | Effect of adult-child conflict on couple
Resentment of directive stepfather |
| 18. | It (directing) really alienated the kids from him, and despite more than a hundred discussions on it, and him saying, "It'll just take time", I kind of think that in three years there should be a relationship, and if not there may never be one. | Directive stepparent alienates her children; Her expectations for their closeness do not materialize | Resentment of stepparent
Expectations
Stepfamily as an ordeal |
| 19. | He was very responsibility oriented. He couldn't just sit and be interested talking to the kids. So that was missing, and I feel it's so important. | Disappointment with her partner's task oriented interaction with her children | Disappointment about differences in parenting |
| 20. | He wanted the relationship and I think he wanted it just with me. I think that what was wrong was that everything that he did for them was really for me, not for them. | Partner's need for a relationship with her does not transfer to his relationship with her children | Exclusivity -with mom/without kids
Division within the stepfamily |
| 21. | When he would try to help them, it would be what he thought I needed done, not what they needed done. | Partner's need for a relationship with her contaminates his relationship with her children | Access to mom through her kids
Enmeshment with children |
| 22. | Instead of listening to the imaginative part of stories my daughter wrote, he'd correct the spelling. It was all very structured. The kids weren't used to that and didn't appreciate it. It didn't have the right effect. | Partner's need for correctness and structure alienates her children | Clash of values
Devaluing partner's contribution |

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| 23. | It was a helping role but it didn't have an endearing effect. | Partner's "helping" alienates her children | Devaluing partner's contribution |
| 24. | I enjoyed his children a lot. The eighteen year old boy and I became very close. | Enjoys and becomes close to her stepson | Idealized relationship with stepchildren |
| 25. | He saw me angry with his dad all the time. I was so angry with him for the fights my kids would get into (with him). So he became upset with me as well. | Conflict with her partner alienates her stepson and initiates his anger | Adult conflict distances stepchildren |
| 26. | His twelve year old son really used to like it when I spent time with him and he'd let me give him a hug and a kiss goodnight. But when he saw my kids starting not to like his dad, he started to be really hard on me, and I thought to myself, is he trying to even the score? I've done nothing to him but try to be nice to him. | Relationship with her stepson is close but deteriorates as conflict between her partner and her children develops; she resents being a scapegoat | Stepchild is protective of parent
Stepchild is vengeful of stepparent |
| 27. | It was very difficult. There were so many people to please in the house, but even then I think it should have worked. I think it's a cop out to say that it can't work just because there are so many kids. What wasn't working was that we just did things so differently. | Pleasing everyone was difficult. Differences rather than numbers seemed at the root of this difficulty | Difficulties "pleasing" everyone
Differences from partner |
| 28. | His answers (about privileges) were always different than I would have given the kids. So had we been closer in our casualness or our ways of looking at things, some conflict wouldn't have arisen. | Conflict arose from her partner's independently considered responses to her children's requests | Differences create conflict
Clash of values |
| 29. | Even though it (decision making) had gone on before, he thought that wasn't the way it should be, and I can't understand it because I never would have done it that way myself. | Partner's repeated experience in decision making does not bring him to her point of view | Resents and devalues partner's independence |
| 30. | The talks and talks went to the point that before we moved in together we decided that we were not going to talk about the kids any more. It got so heated, we got so angry at one another and our relationships was just being ripped apart. | Talking about issues related to children leads to anger and breakdown of communication. Discussions stopped to prevent further deterioration of adult relationship | Defensiveness on parenting issues |
| 31. | He was so tolerant of me it was beautiful. It was an unconditional caring for me which did not extend to my children. | Enjoys partner's unconditional love and appreciation but regrets it does not extend to her children | Double standard in adult/child relationship |
| 32. | His son said a few times, "Well, my mom wouldn't do things that way." But I didn't feel threatened by that or take it personally I would just say that it was good that his mother did it that way. | Does not feel threatened by her stepson's relationship with his mother and reinforces it | Positive relationship with her stepchild |

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| <p>33. I felt that there were times when my partner was very threatened by any comments like that - if the kids said anything like "I don't have to listen to you because you're not my father". Now there's a very typical thing that kids are going to say. I really felt that he became so defensive at those times that his back got up right away and whatever came out would usually be angry.</p> | <p>Partner is threatened by stepchildren's parental relationship; he becomes angry when they defend boundaries of former nuclear family</p> | <p>Father/child relationship threatens stepfather</p> |
| <p>34. I even spoke to him about trying not to take things personally. Certainly it was very hard for him to hear those things (see 33). The kids can see that they can get ya'.</p> | <p>Her partner finds it difficult not to feel threatened; children pick up on this and use it</p> | <p>Children's use of power
Stepparent as outsider</p> |
| <p>35. Their father is a very good man who loves them a lot, but it becomes very complicated. He's remarried, his wife has trouble accepting the children, has trouble accepting that he had a life before, and the day they got married she phoned me and said that the kids aren't coming here as often.</p> | <p>Feels positive about her former husband's relationship with their children, negative about his new wife's responses to them</p> | <p>Nostalgia for nuclear family
Effects of establishing boundaries
Critical of former husband's new wife</p> |
| <p>36. So she is also very rigid. She reads books on trying how to determine how to handle these children. You'd think they were little monsters, you really would.</p> | <p>Criticizes children's stepmother; defends her children's behavior</p> | <p>Criticism of stepparent
Effects of establishing boundaries</p> |
| <p>37. Their father has a problem in that he cannot please his wife and see his children, too. He is struggling with that now. He drew away from his children trying to make a life for himself. I think he has trouble understanding why she can't care for his children because he cares deeply for them.</p> | <p>Sympathizes with her former husband; blames his marital partner for creating distance between him and his children; critical of their stepmother's lack of understanding</p> | <p>Stepparent as an intruder
Effects of establishing boundaries
Empathy with former spouse</p> |
| <p>38. My children were not really on too much of a schedule with their own father, therefore being very free to establish a new relationship with a man. They really welcomed this man into the relationship, which was their attitude whenever I dated anyone else. When children are very open like that, you wonder why it couldn't work.</p> | <p>Sees her children's attitude to her partner as open; implies difficulties in stepfamily formation are due to other causes</p> | <p>Children's attitude to stepfather
Blames her partner</p> |
| <p>39. You know, you think it's quite right and it should work. We got a house that was big enough for all of us, so that the logistics of living together would be simple.</p> | <p>Resents the fact the stepfamily had difficulties in spite of a large house and the "right" logistics</p> | <p>Resentment
Difficulties in stepfamily formation</p> |
| <p>40. It took me a year to have him understand that that (not changing children's schools) would be one less disruptive thing. He finally gave in to that. I should have sensed then that we had different ways of thinking.</p> | <p>Frustration grows from difficulty convincing partner of her point of view re: disruptions for children</p> | <p>Mother's need for control
Clash of values</p> |
| <p>41. There was resentment over a lot of things, at first, but we talked about that and I said if we're going to do it (i.e. live together), don't resent it. I expected him to resent more than he did.</p> | <p>Resentment buried as stepfamily is formed; Surprised that her partner is not more resentful</p> | <p>Difficulty in stepfamily formation
Unsuccessful communication</p> |

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| 42. (After we broke up once) he decided he wanted me there bad enough to take on this unit. And once he made the decision, it was very strongly made, but my relationship with him had been weakened. I knew he had run once from it when we had been going out for two years, and so I said to myself he doesn't really want it. He wants me but not them. | Partnership crisis triggers partner's commitment to stepfamily formation; Trust is damaged; feels her partner wants relationship with her but not her children | Commitment for wrong reason
Damaged trust
Enmeshment with children |
| 43. I didn't care if he gave me flowers and I didn't care if he cleaned the house, and I didn't care that he cooked. All I cared was that he got along with my kids, because otherwise it wasn't going to work. | Devalues her partner's affectionate and supportive behaviors not fitting her priorities, i.e. closeness to her children | Devaluing partner's affection
Enmeshment with children |
| 44. I remember describing to him a picture and imagining a cord between me and three children, that was always connected- that what he did to them affected me- zap- instantly. | Experiences physically her partner's emotional impact on her children | Stepparent as an outsider
Enmeshment with children |
| 45. What he said to them was as if it were said to me. The way he handled was as if he were handling me. I wanted him to handle them the way he handled me. It was beautiful the way he handled me. | Identifies directly with her children's experiences of her partner; Regrets he cannot treat them as he treats her. | Enmeshment with children |
| 46. He'd look at me and he'd hear it, but he couldn't do it. So, they got totally different treatment than I did. To me, he was warm and loving and always holding me and just anything he could do for me, tolerating my clothes everywhere and never, never angry. | Feels loved and accepted by her partner; appreciates his affection; resents the fact he does not act on her request to relate to her children the way she wants him to | Enmeshment with children
Double standard for approval |
| 47. Those things (tidiness) was not an issue between us at all. He thought it was funny when I would try to be cleaner and tidier for him. He was just fantastic with me, but totally opposite with my kids. So the cord did not exist for him. | Frustration with her partner's double standard for her and her children re: tidiness | Double standard for stepparent / partner's approval
Enmeshment with children |
| 48. I became desperate to try to show him some other way that he had to treat them so I could be there with him. It didn't matter how I put it, he just didn't get it. | Desperation in attempts to change partner's behavior with her children so she can stay in the relationship | Parenting issues crucial to adult relationship
Enmeshment with children |
| 49. He was still the responsible person organizing our lives rather than sharing himself with them. I got it all. I got every piece of him, and I didn't want it all. It became so much I couldn't even handle it. I got everything and there they were, just watching. | Feels controlled and overwhelmed by partner; resents him not sharing of himself with her children | Differential effect of partner on her/children |
| 50. We got along fine and had fun when we first started dating, because at that time he hadn't started to feel he had some ownership of us, or some right. | Enjoys the early stages of the relationship before her partner feels he has ownership or rights | Mother's need for autonomy
Disempowered stepfather |
| 51. When he felt that he didn't have the right, which is the way I honestly think it should have remained, he could leave it to me. And when he left it to me, we all got along great. | Experiences the relationship with her partner as "great" as long as he is not expressing his "right" as a parental figure | Mother's need for control
Disempowered stepfather
Stepparent as an outsider |

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| 52. If a kid was upset, I'd deal with it. Or if he didn't like what they were doing, they I'd holler at them. But he'd leave it to me. | Satisfied being the sole parental figure | Mother's need for control
Disempowered stepfather
Stepparent as an outsider |
| 53. And he'd play with them, because at first we were just playing. He didn't have to worry about them, because who was I to him at that time. As soon as the relationship got serious, he started to see himself in a fathering role. All of a sudden he wasn't joking with them any more or playing with them any more. Whatever happened was my fault, because whenever we'd go out together somebody would get shit! | Enjoys her partner as a playmate until he intervenes in an authoritative way with her children when the relationship becomes more serious; she blames herself for her children's behavior | Mother's need for control
Disempowered stepfather
Stepparent as an outsider |
| 54. I stopped doing things with my kids as a group. I couldn't stand it. I couldn't stand the pressure of it. What used to be fun, wasn't fun any more. I worried about how I was going to handle it. How was I going to keep them quiet in the car? How were they going to behave? | Withdraws from stepfamily activities fearing her partner's response to her children's behavior | Control by withdrawal
Mother as family "figurehead"/
"whipping boy" |
| 55. I started to lose control and he started to take it all. I started to worry more about what he was going to say about how I had always done it with my kids than just handling it the way I always had. So it started to almost be handed over to him. | Feels she is losing control and hands control over to her partner in attempting to avoid conflict | Mother fears loss of control
Avoidance of conflict |
| 56. I started to worry and it started to be less fun. So, he and I went out on our own all the time. It was the only way to have fun. | Worries about her partner's response to her children; Couple isolates from stepfamily unit | Enmeshment with children
Division within the stepfamily |
| 57. I couldn't bring my kids because I was on edge. | Detaches herself from her children to reduce her anxiety | Compartmentalizing the stepfamily
Avoidance of conflict |
| 58. He was a very strong person and very influential on me, and affected my very thought processes when I was with my children. | Experiences her partner's influence on her thinking when she is with her children | Fears of engulfment by partner |
| 59. Even when he wasn't there, I was thinking what he would say if they did this. I've got to stop them doing this now because he'd be angry if we ever went together. | Feels her partner's disapproval of her children even in his absence | Effect of her partner
Enmeshment with children
Enmeshment with partner |
| 60. I really started to become "not myself" knowing that I had to correct these things before we went together, when really they were not that bad, they were okay. | Disassociates her own ideas of parenting in favor of her partner's imagined disapproval | Enmeshment with partner
Loss of identity
Defensive of children's behavior |
| 61. I left one day because he and my daughter were fighting over the computer. It was a small thing, but it was one of one hundred small things that had happened in the time we were together, and it was more than I could handle. | Withdraws from the relationship angry over many ongoing conflicts between her partner and her children | Avoidance of conflict
Unsuccessful communication |

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| 62. We were trying to have fun. I had all these kids in the kitchen making crepes. He loved to see us having fun, but he was always watching. It was okay but I sensed that something was going to happen, because something always happened when we were having fun. | Resents her partner as a "watcher" and a "spoiler" when she is having fun with her children | Stepparent as an outsider
Stepfamily as an ordeal
Difficulties blending |
| 63. There were always these little talks. I was so tired of the talks over what I considered to be so irrelevant, but it wasn't irrelevant to him. | Frustrated by attempts to resolve issues; disagrees with partner on importance of issues | Clash of values
Unsuccessful communication |
| 64. We packed and we left. It was almost over nothing. But I was so tired of the talks, so tired of the rules that I'd never grown up with, that the kids hadn't grown up with. | Frustrated dealing with issues which were non-existent for her in her family of origin or single parent family | Nostalgia for single parent family
Nostalgia for family of origin
Stepfamily as an ordeal |
| 65. We just threw our stuff in the car and got out of there. I felt like I was running for my life. | Feels she must "run for her life" | Need for autonomy
Threat of losing identity
Stepfamily as an ordeal |
| 66. I started to get angry with my kids. I thought, "What have you done to commandeer the end of this relationship?" | Anger with children for their part in the demise of the stepfamily | Anger with children
Children's use of power |
| 67. He was saying that the kids commandeered it. I started to think that it was true. Sure enough, I think that it was I think that they to some extent saw a way out. | Sees her children's influence on the demise of the relationship | Stepparent as an outsider
Struggle for power
Children's use of power |
| 68. I heard my daughter talking back to him. I didn't like it but I knew where she was coming from, because I didn't like what he was doing either. I thought, "What's going to happen now? Is she going to become a sassy kid that she never was before?" | Disapproves of her daughter's reactions to stepfather at one level and identifies at another; fears this will generalize to other relationships. | Stepparent as an outsider
Child's use of power
Enmeshment with children |
| 69. My daughter has become very powerful. She saw the end of this relationship, that she wanted, that they all wanted. And I've had trouble with her feeling very powerful, and now I have to get her down to not being powerful. | Feels threatened experiencing her children's power influencing the relationship's demise | Children's use of power
Effects of children on adult relationship |
| 70. That's a lot of power for a kid to say, "Mom, we've got to leave", and then we leave. | Feels guilty for being influenced by children's wishes | Guilt about influence by children
Children's use of power |
| 71. That worked on me, too. Three kids begging me to leave. Now, if I hadn't thought they had valid reasons for saying that, I wouldn't have left. I wouldn't give my kids that kind of power. | Feels guilty for staying in a family form which made her children unhappy | Guilt for children's unhappiness
Children's use of power |
| 72. If I was a kid I couldn't stand it. No wonder they wanted to leave. I understood where they were coming from. | Identifies with her children's unhappiness in the stepfamily | Stepfamily as an ordeal
Enmeshment with children |

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| 73. | It made it really hard for him, no matter how much I warned him what was going to happen. He said, I want them (my children) to respect me. I don't care if they're my friend. " I said I wanted them to be his friend and they'd respect and listen later. But it didn't happen that way. | Frustrated her partner would not follow her advice about relating to her children | Mother's need for control |
| 74. | There started to become two divided camps in our house. He, in trying to show me how compassionate he was with his own kids, because I was constantly criticizing him for not being compassionate with mine. | Stepfamily feels divided between "his and her" factions; Criticism of her partner brings his one-up response | Divisions within the stepfamily
Struggle for power |
| 75. | He was listening to his son as if he were the parent, and within two months this boy became a little Hitler. | Resents her stepson's power over his father | Resentment of children's use of power |
| 76. | These dynamics he was playing in our house were sapping us. | Feels sapped by stepfamily dynamics | Stepfamily as an ordeal
Blames partner |
| 77. | He was sleeping all the time. He must have been depressed. It (conflict) was just wrecking everything. I just wanted to get out of there because all my stress was surrounding him at that time. | Feels stressed in relationship with her partner; identifies with his feeling of stress | Stepfamily as an ordeal
Blames partner |
| 78. | I didn't want to plan an activity on the weekend with him and the kids. I just wanted a break from all that. | Withdraws from family activity to get a break | Control by withdrawal
Self preservation |
| 79. | Things that had seemed ideal came to nothing. It became so difficult to be together. I just wanted get away from it, my kids just wanted to get away from it. | Disappointed by failure of ideals; wants to escape | Sense of failure
Guilt
Stepfamily as an ordeal |
| 80. | The kids didn't want him to come. He felt left out, and at the same time he probably needed some peace from it, too. | Feels pressure from her children to exclude stepparent; rationalizes his need for a break | Children's use of power
Rationalization of his exclusion |
| 81. | As an adult, I understood his personality and his quirks, and I thought, "That's okay". But the children just couldn't understand that. They could only see he wasn't there through the fun times. | Devalues partner in order to accept him; rationalizes her children's rejection of him | Devalues partner
Rationalization of his exclusion |
| 82. | His sleep was sort of a violent reaction on his part. It was an escape reaction. It was a constant escape. He was asleep by seven o'clock at night. | Resents her partner's withdrawal by sleeping | Resentment of partner
Control by withdrawal |
| 83. | We were going crazy at the table. He was withdrawing farther and farther from us. He withdrew to the point where he excused himself from the table and slept through the evening.. Again, the fun was wrecked. And you know, all the man needed to do was relax and let it happen. But it was not his nature. | Resents her partner's non-participation and withdrawal from family fun | Resentment of partner
Control by withdrawal |
| 84. | So his good things were there, so it should work But it boils down to one thing- rigidity and discipline. | Feels guilty for devaluing her partner for qualities she disliked; permitting them to overshadow his "good" qualities | Guilt for devaluing her partner |

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| 85. I knew I'd picked a person who was very set in his ways, very rigid. | Regrets "picking" her partner knowing what he was like | Guilt for choice of partner
Blames/devalues her partner |
| 86. That's the nature of children. They are takers, and that's okay. | Sees and approves of her children as takers | Defends enmeshment with children |
| 87. Children will not automatically give someone the benefit of the doubt. He looks angry, he's angry, he probably doesn't like me...is the child's thought process. It isn't developed enough to think beyond that. | Identifies with her children's thought process as a rationalization for them rejecting her partner | Children's use of power
Enmeshment with children |
| 88. When you're a stepfather you're going to be wrong because you're going to do it different. It may not be wrong, but they're going to think you're wrong. | Rationalizes children's interpretation of "different" as "wrong" | Stepparent as an outsider
Enmeshment with children |
| 89. To me he would say he was wrong, but never to the kids. | Frustrated by her partner's refusal to apologize to her her children | Differences in parenting
Frustration with partner's need to be "right" |
| 90. I feel that there was a very strong need to feel powerful in the eyes of the child. To be powerful. That was not working with me. He had tried that with me many times but it had never worked | Angry with her partner's need to feel powerful | Devalues partner's need for power
Struggle for power |
| 91. He always used to say, "I know everything there is to know about kids. Quit lecturing me about it. I've been a teacher for eighteen years." This is not a classroom, this is a home. | Rejects partner's professional experience in the context of the stepfamily | Devalues her partner's contribution
Stepparent as an outsider |
| 92. There was a need for him to feel in control at all times. So he was not able to talk to the children at their level. | Sees partner's need to control interfering with his ability to communicate with her children | Devalues partner's communication skills
Blames her partner |
| 93. What happened was that the kids learned to fight back in an unfair fight, and then they started doing that in a fair fights. They were learning all kinds of wrong things as the product of being told too many times, too firmly, too sternly, things I would not have told them. | Sees her children practising undesirable behaviors; blames her partner for this development | Scapegoating partner for children's behavior
Defensive of children |
| 94. In the children's eyes, his love was conditional. As an adult I could see a deeper love but the kids couldn't, so what the hell good is it. It's as good as not caring. | Feels angry with her partner's conditional love for her children; devalues it | Devaluation of partner |
| 95. I told him over and over again about all these people I had worked with and all the things I had learned, but he couldn't stop saying, "Look how good my kids are. I know how to do it. You don't have to keep telling me." | Feels frustrated when her expertise as a parent clashes with his | Struggle for power
Clash of values |
| 96. I was so angry at that point I didn't want to be bothered with counselling. In retrospect we even said, "Why did two supposedly intelligent people not come up with the idea of seeing counsellors?" It was because we were so angry at the time. | Anger precludes counselling when their relationship is in crisis | Anger brings communication breakdown
Stepfamily as an ordeal |

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| 97. | It was burning bridges time. Let's get the heck out of here. | Anger precipitates complete withdrawal and precludes consideration of compromise | Cataclysmic anger
Control by withdrawal |
| 98. | If I had it to do over again, to make it work I would have to have had more confidence in him. Maybe I should just have seen what would have happened if I didn't interfere. Maybe I stepped in when I shouldn't have. | Feels guilty about over controlling the relationship; cites lack of trust as her reason | Guilt for over-control
Lack of trust |
| 99. | If we had been just a little closer in our ways of doing things, maybe I would have understood it. | Regrets differences were so great understanding was not possible for her | Regrets clash of values |
| 100 | I didn't like what he was doing. I was really angry and upset and couldn't help it, so I would hit him in a way that probably I shouldn't have. | Feels guilty for out of control anger and attacking her partner | Blames her partner
Guilt for anger |
| 101 | He used to say, Why don't you tell me how to handle your children. Tell me what to do".But he took it so literally. It would go way beyond what I meant. | Devalues her partner's attempts for her input on dealing with her children | Devalues partner
Clash of values
Stepparent as outsider |
| 102 | I didn't give it long enough and why didn't I try a little harder? I think I had lost all faith and if I could have just kept the faith a little longer maybe it would have fallen into place. | Feels guilty for the relationship's failure through her loss of faith | Guilt for stepfamily failure
Stepfamily as an ordeal |
| 103 | Maybe I had too many people bombarding me. The emotional strength that was required was sapped from me. | Feels overwhelmed by demands of the stepfamily | Difficulty in blending |
| 104 | I would say that because of all our fights over the years I was already weakened before I went in there. I was already weakened in terms of a trust for him. | Feels weakened by conflicts which have eroded her trust | Loss of trust
Effects of conflict |
| 105 | It takes an awful lot of energy to deal with the dynamics of all that going on. I don't know that it had to be like that. What did I do wrong? It's not just my fault. | Feels guilty but also blames others for failure of the stepfamily | Guilt for stepfamily failure
Blames self/others |
| 106 | What I did not do is support the other person. How do you do that when you don't believe in his way of dealing with the children? | Feels guilty for not supporting her partner; blames his approaches with her children | Guilt for not supporting partner
Blames her partner
Enmeshment with children |
| 107 | Natural parents have significant differences. Kids grow up with the differences, so that doesn't create quite the same hassles. | Idealizes differences in the nuclear family as less conflictive than stepfamily differences | Nostalgia for nuclear family
Stepparent as outsider |
| 108 | You may think you're on the same wavelength because you have the same goals for your kids. No, it's the logistics of how you obtain those goals. | Recognizes differences in approaches to shared goals are significant | Clash of values |
| 109 | I can say that I have a trust in the way he was with his (kids). | Acknowledges trust in partner's parenting ability with his own children | Stepparent as an outsider |

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| 110 | About six-eight months into the relationship I said, "I've had enough. You say nothing to my kids to discipline them when you come in this house. I don't care if they eat, I don't care if they don't eat. Leave them alone. So, "Okay, I'm out of it." but out of it meant no closeness emotionally, no playing. | Feels angry with her partner's intervention with her children; resents his emotional withdrawal when she orders him to back off | Anger and resentment with partner
Control through withdrawal |
| 111 | Consistency means that consistently, mom might change her mind (laughs) No. That consistently, if we have a discussion, and it turns out a little differently, that's okay, too. | Embarrassed by her lack of consistency; values negotiation and control with her children | Guilt for lack of consistency
Need for control |
| 112 | He was very frustrated with my inconsistency. But he was consistent to a fault. | Defends her inconsistency by comparing it to her partner's "consistency to a fault" | Guilt about inconsistency
Blames partner |
| 113 | It's really hard for me to stick to something I say. I guess you could say the kids know when I mean it. | Feels guilty about inconsistency with her children; defends her integrity as a parent | Guilt and defensiveness
Need for control |
| 114 | I learned an awful lot from him which has helped me with my parenting, but I'll never take it to his extreme. I don't know if we ever could have blended, if it could have come to the mid-point ever. | Acknowledges learning about parenting from her partner, but defends her less extreme approaches | Acknowledges her partner's parenting
Retroflective learning |
| 115 | There were so many areas I couldn't support him in and we ended up fighting about that I didn't support him in areas I should have. | Feels guilty for not supporting her partner; Regrets their clashes over differences | Guilt for not supporting partner
Regrets clash of values |
| 116 | Lack of agreement poisons your ability to accept what they're doing. I hated seeing everybody crying all the time. Even though you loved that person, you kind of lose something watching that happen | Conflict poisons her experience of her partner; She feels conflicts between her partner and children affect the basis of the adult relationship | Past impinges on present experience
Effects of children on adult relationship |
| 117 | You love your kids so much and you've worked so hard to be with them, that even if they're rotten little kids someone can't come into the room and tell them that, even if it's true. | Defensive of criticism of her children, "even if it's true", because she loves them | Denial of children's misbehavior
Values struggles of single parent family |
| 118 | Because a single parent has probably struggled very hard and the child probably has a lot of rotten characteristics that maybe they've overlooked or had to because of lack of supervision and all the rest. But you just can't go in there and start saying that. | Feels guilty as a single parent for her children's behavior; Defensive of outsider's criticism | Guilt and defensiveness for children's misbehavior
Enmeshment with children |
| 119 | It was very damaging to him- just as bad as it was for me to have all those mixed feelings and be so sapped by everything and becoming so angry with one another. | Feels guilty for the negative effect of the stepfamily relationship on her partner; identifies with his feelings | Guilt partner's negative experience
Empathy with partner |
| 120 | He began to question so much about himself. Maybe there were things that needed questioning, but his whole person became involved here, where he just felt an unwanted person. I hated what I was doing to him. | Feels guilty for the negative effect of the stepfamily relationship on her partner; identifies with his feelings | Guilt for partner's negative experience
Stepfamily as an ordeal |

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| 121 | It's the sort of thing where you have to know what you can change and what you can't. If the writing is on the wall about what you can't change, then just leave it alone. Love will not keep you there. | Regrets the loss of love in conflicts over differences | Regrets loss of love
Clash of values |
| 122 | It's a hard thing to do to walk away from someone you care for that much without resenting your children. You know, at least you think, that if you didn't have your children, you'd have the person you've always wanted to be with for the rest of your life. | Resents her children for their role in the demise of the stepfamily | Resents children's use of power |
| 123 | Marriage would make it harder for the kids to reject that person, but there has to be a tremendous amount of trust because before you marry someone you really have to believe it's going to work. On the other side, how the heck do you know with that many kids. | Feels vulnerable considering the prospect of marriage and the amount of trust it will require; recognizes children's power to sabotage | Vulnerability as a pleaser
Children's use of power |
| 124 | I think I was committed to this relationship at one point, but I don't think I was committed sufficiently at the time we went into that house together. | Commitment feels weakened over time | Weakened commitment
Stepfamily as an ordeal |
| 125 | Was it love at first sight? No. But there was something right from the beginning. I couldn't separate from him. We got into this sort of control thing and I was sort of taken and intrigued by him. Within a couple of months I wanted to spend all my time with him. | Felt strongly attracted to her partner in a "sort of control thing" | Need for control
Attraction to partner |
| 126 | We got so enmeshed. I felt even when he wasn't around me, my thoughts were being controlled by how he would respond to things and I started to change my ways of being with my own kids, even when he wasn't there. He was very powerful with me that way. | Feels enmeshed with partner; experiences him as powerful, controlling her when he's not there; he influences her relationships with her children | Enmeshment with partner
Partner's effect on her |

Table 6
Higher Order Thematic Descriptions of Penny's Stepfamily Experience

Thematic Clusters	Generalized Descriptions
1. Criticism of Partner (1, 15, 16, 17, 22, 23, 38, 48, 50, 51, 62, 73, 82, 84, 85, 90, 92, 93, 100, 101, 106, 112)	Failure of stepparent - stepchild closeness is stepfather's fault; discounts his making meals and doing laundry when her priority for him was emotional closeness with her children; resents his directive approaches with her children; condemns his non-compliance with her advice about relating to her children; feels desperate to change his behavior; enjoyed partner when he had no "right" as a parent; derides his attempts to feel powerful in the stepfamily; defends children's undesirable responses to her partner as his fault; resents his withdrawal by sleeping; rigidity overshadows his good qualities; regrets "picking" him, knowing what he was like; rejects his professional expertise in family context; she saw him only control, not "communicate" with children; angry his love for her children is conditional, "as good as no love at all"; doesn't like what he does and "hits him in a way she shouldn't"; devalues his attempts to comply with her wishes; disagreement about parenting spreads to her being non-supportive in all relationship areas
2. Differences in Parenting (2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 19, 27, 28, 29, 40, 63, 95, 99, 108, 109, 112, 115)	Recognizes differences in her partner's life cycle, parenting style, priorities; patterns traced to family of origin reveal her need for freedom, his for structure; exploration reveals differing parenting philosophies; misses partner's interest in rather than direction of children; difficulty "pleasing everyone" attributed to parenting differences not numbers of children; differences overshadow shared values; differing approaches undermine shared goals; they disagree on what is relevant and appropriate in parenting; frustration grows convincing him of her point of view; she trusts him with his kids; each is frustrated by others' level of consistency; differences preclude understanding; conflict renders her unable to support partner where she "should" have

3. Stepfamily as an Ordeal
(9, 10, 18, 25, 26, 30, 41, 56, 57,
61, 64, 65, 76, 77, 79, 96, 102,
103, 105, 116, 119, 120, 121, 124)

Couple's attraction and harmony are eclipsed by conflict whenever children are present; time has increased children's alienation by her partner; unresolved parenting issues threaten adult relationship- their discussion is called off; resentment is buried; couple isolates "to have fun"; P avoids conflict with her partner, reduces her anxiety by distancing herself from her children; leaves adult relationships due to conflicts between her partner and children; feels she is "running for her life"; feels "sapped" by family dynamics, associates her adult partner with stress; disappointed by failure of ideals, she seeks escape; her anger precludes family counselling; feels overwhelmed by stepfamily demands and guilty for its failure; blames failure on herself and others; conflict over parenting poisoned her experience of her partner; her commitment weakened over time; feels guilty for partner's negative experience with her; she regrets the loss of his love.

4. Partner's need for Control
(11, 14, 49, 83, 89, 110)

He lays down rules to "help her"; "bosses" by doing all the house work; organizes rather than shares with the family; withdraws from family fun; withdraws emotionally when told to back off on discipline; he refused to apologize to her children

5. Cohesiveness of Single Parent Family
(12, 13, 53, 62, 118)

Partner's good intentions are resented in "their" house; "her" happy family resents his rules; partner is enjoyed until he begins authoritative "fathering"; he is a "watcher" and "spoiler" when mother and children are having fun; she struggled with single parenting and is defensive when he criticizes her children's behavior

- 6.. Inequities in Stepfamily Relationships
(20, 21, 24, 31, 32, 42, 46, 47)

Her partner's need is for a relationship is for her, excluding her children; things done for them are really for her; she feels close to her stepchildren; supports their mother - child relationship; her partner is threatened by her children's relationship with their father; she regrets partner's unconditional love for her is not extend to her children; resents partner not extending tolerance of her untidiness to her children; sees partner practicing a double standard for approval of her and her children.

7. Mother's Emotional Involvement
with her Children
(36, 38, 43, 44, 45, 58, 68, 71, 72,
81, 86, 87, 88, 93, 117)

Condemns children's stepmother for
implying they are "little monsters"; sees
children as "very open" to her partner and
other men she has dated; discounts her
partner's affection if his relationship
with her isn't working; feels "a cord"
transmitting feelings from children to
her; her partner's responses to children
affect her directly; identifies with her
daughter's disrespect for partner and
children's unhappiness in stepfamily; she
feels guilty for their unhappiness in the
stepfamily; rationalizes children's
rejection of stepfather and their
interpretation of his being "different" as
"wrong"; approves of her children as
"takers", and projects their thought
processes; defends children's "rotteness"
because she "loves them"

8. Children's use of Power
(25, 26, 33, 34, 66, 67, 69, 70, 75,
80, 122, 123)

Her children devalue stepfather's
authority; use his "non-parent" status to
make him vulnerable; she feels angry her
children "commandeered" stepfamily's
demise; thinks sabotaging the adult
relationship was their way out of the
stepfamily; her daughter's power feels
threatening now; feels guilty responding
to children's influence; resents her
stepson's influence on his father; adult
conflict alienates her stepchildren; they
are "hard" on her; she feels children
pressure for exclusion of her partner;
resents children's negative influence on
the adult relationship; views marriage as
vulnerable to children's sabotage.

9. Penny's Experience of her Partner
(58, 59, 60, 125, 126)

Partner's "strength" influences her
thinking and interactions with her
children; internalizes his disapproval;
starts to feel "not myself"; attraction to
him centers on control; feels enmeshed
with him, controlled and influenced with
her children

10. Nostalgia for the Nuclear Family
(35, 37, 107)

Feels her former husband is "a good man";
sees their children distanced and rejected
by his new wife; identifies with his
struggle to love his children and to
please his new wife; sees parenting
differences in nuclear families as less
conflictive than in stepfamilies

11. Mother's Need for Control
(28, 29, 55, 73, 78, 97, 98, 110, 111
113)

Anger with partner's independent responses
to children, and his failure to see her
point of view; she withdraws from family
activities and adult partnership when
conflict becomes uncontrollable; loses
control and "hands it over" to her
partner; frustration grows when partner
will not follow her advice about relating
to children; "burns bridges" as conflict
with partner intensifies; over-controls
due to lack of trust; orders partner to
back off discipline, resents his
subsequent emotional withdrawal; defends
inconsistency as "kids know when I mean
it"

12. Difficulties in Stepfamily Formation
(39, 74, 104, 114)

Purchasing a big house to simplify
stepfamily logistics is ineffective;
stepfamily divides into "his-her" camps
criticized and defended by each parent;
conflicts over time erode trust; she
learns from her partner but can't imagine
resolving extreme differences;

An Integrated Paraphrase of Penny's Experience of a
Stepfamily

Stepfamily formation is an ordeal for Penny. Conflicts with her partner over parenting poison her experience. She is "sapped" by stepfamily dynamics. Commitment to her partner weakens over time. Overwhelmed by stepfamily demands, she seeks escape, "running for her life". Subsequently, she experiences guilt and a sense of failure.

Penny feels torn choosing between commitment to her partner or loyalty to her children. Initially, she enjoys her partner. Her ideal for the stepfamily is emotional closeness between him and her children. As this closeness fails to develop, she blames her partner. She resents his directive and authoritative approaches to parenting. He seems an outsider attempting to control "her" family. Penny wants to change his behavior. His attempts to comply are unsatisfying. She attacks him and then feels guilty. She resents his emotional withdrawal when criticized. She is angry with herself for "picking" an unsuitable partner.

Penny feels powerless to change the couple's differing philosophies and parenting styles. She values fun and freedom; he values order and structure. Their differences preclude understanding. Over time, differences undermine their common goals, overshadow shared values and she senses a loss in these failed ideals. Penny fights to defend her parental integrity but feels guilty for not supporting her partner's stepparenting efforts. She is nostalgic for her

family of origin and former nuclear family where parenting differences seemed less conflictual.

The challenge of vying for control attracts Penny to her partner. She feels he is "strong", and over time, experiences his influence in her thoughts and actions in a way that is "not herself". Her partner seems like a "watcher" and a "spoiler" of family fun. She resents him organizing tasks rather than sharing their activities. Penny vacillates between over-involvement in situations when she distrusts her partner, and withdrawal by "handing over" control to him when she feels overwhelmed. She wearies of struggling for control.

Penny feels betrayed by the discrepancy between her partner's unconditional love for her and his conditional love for her children. She resents his double standard of approving of her behavior but not of her children's. She feels cheated by his lack of reciprocity in her support for children's relationships with their biological parents outside the stepfamily. Penny identifies with her former husband's dilemma: wanting to be close to their children without offending his new partner.

Penny feels insecure about the adequacy of her single parenting history and defensive about her children's behavior. When her children are criticized, a "cord" transmits their hurt feelings directly to her. Penny feels vulnerable to emotional sabotage by her children. By choosing to stay in the stepfamily, she feels responsible for sustaining their unhappiness. Yielding to her children's

pressure to exclude her mate, Penny fears losing her autonomy as an adult.

DianaPersonal Information

Diana is a professional woman in her early forties who holds a graduate degree. She was married for about ten years and was sole custodian of her three children for two years before becoming involved in a stepfamily. Her children continue to visit their father on a self-regulated schedule. Over the seven year course of her common-law stepfamily relationship, two of her three children have completed school, taken jobs and established their own residences. At the time of our interviews, the "writing was on the wall" for Diana's relationship with her partner. When I subsequently contacted her to elicit her feedback on my analysis of her experience, she had left her partner and was living with her daughter who is still in school.

Excerpts from interviews with Diana are listed in the first column of Table 7. They appear in the order in which she presented them. Clusters of related themes from Diana's descriptions are found in Table 8. An integrated paraphrase of her experience follows.

Table 7
Thematic Abstraction of Diana's Experience in a Stepfamily

Excerpts from transcribed interview	Two Levels of Abstraction	
	1. Paraphrases	2. Themes
1. Stepparenting is incredibly difficult; I'd have never attempted a blended family if I'd have known how difficult it is.	Realizes the difficulty in stepfamily formation; in retrospect, would have chosen another option.	Difficulty in Stepfamily Formation
2. If I could do it over, I wouldn't allow it to happen the way it did.	Acknowledges her responsibility in the process of stepfamily formation and that in retrospect she would fulfill this differently.	Learning in hindsight
3. Our stepfamily happened too quickly and without ceremony.	Recognizes that pacing of stepfamily formation was too quick and ceremony was absent.	Need prepotency
4. He was lonely. I was overloaded. It was nice to think about sharing parenting. It was romantic. I allowed myself to be washed away.	Identifies factors in decision making; loneliness and overloading, romance and the ideal of sharing parenting.	Mutuality of needs Need for relationship
5. My hunch is, he wanted a family even more than he wanted me.	Feels her partner was attracted to a family relationship, as well to her as an adult partner.	Partner's need for family
6. Given more time, I'm not sure I would have gotten into a stepparenting arrangement with this man. We're quite different in our emotional energy, pace and hobbies.	Realizes time pressure was a factor in not recognizing differences between her and her partner.	Learning in hindsight Regret
7. I missed dating over a period of time, sharing leisure, and a ceremony marking the transition creating a new family.	Recognizes the importance of taking time in dating, sharing leisure; realizing the importance of a transition ceremony marking the creation of a stepfamily.	Hindsight Regret-Speed Prepotency of need:
8. The courting period was short, he moved in and the children were enwrapped in weeks. I'm embarrassed I allowed it to proceed that way.	Feels embarrassment in recognizing responsibility for controlling pace of the stepfamily formation and the stress created for her children by rapid pacing.	Prepotency of need: Regret-Speed Judgement Timing
9. Him moving in shattered my daughter's fantasy of mom and dad getting back together- even though her dad was already remarried.	Sharing space as a stepfamily shattered her daughter's fantasy of nuclear family reconciliation.	Outsider intrusion Trauma Shattering reconciliation fantasy
10. The kids wanted us (mom and dad) back together. They wanted rid of him (stepfather).	Recognizes her children's shared fantasy of nuclear family reconciliation and their subsequent rejection of her new partner.	Outsider intrusion Reconciliation fantasy
11. Our first year together was hell; crisis after crisis with the kids- vandalism, stealing, and arson	Crises developed from children's acting out behavior in their first year as a stepfamily.	Conflict in stepfamily development
12. Year two stabilized a bit; settling in, developing a routine, getting the house in order. But we never got to feel like a settled, well ordered family.	Development and truncation in the process of stepfamily formation.	Progression in stepfamily development

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| 13. I felt my kids took a role - trying to clear him (their stepfather) out. He thought he could make things better if he could make one of them move out. | Need for inclusion generates a power struggle in the stepfamily, between stepchildren and stepfather. | Struggle for power
Outsider vs family member
Inclusion/Control |
| 14. It felt like rivalry: if my boys got rid of him, they could have me to themselves; if he got rid of them he could have me to himself. | Rivalry for her exclusive affection and attention developed between her sons and new partner. | Struggle for power
Mom in the middle
Conflict |
| 15. Instead of building individual relationships with the kids, he immediately took on a parental role of "the disciplinarian". | Disapproves of her partner's attempt for inclusion in the stepfamily by disciplining her children rather than building individual relationships with them. | Struggle for power
Stepfather as intruder
Clash of values in parenting |
| 16. It was hard for him to step back and let me be the parent. | Empathy for her partner's difficulty in learning stepparent rather than parent boundaries. | Clash of stepparent/parental roles |
| 17. Our relationship went best when we spent time as a couple. | Recognizes the positive nature of shared time with her partner as a distinct subsystem in the stepfamily | Effect of establishing boundaries |
| 18. We disagreed on parenting style. The way out of this wrestling match was to spend time together as a couple. | Power struggle between adults emerges over parenting issues, not over their issues as a couple. | Couple/stepfamily conflict
Clash of parenting values |
| 19. He tried to be included by being heard, respected and obeyed, rather than by being social. | Feels angry that her partner's efforts for inclusion in the stepfamily are aggressive rather than assertive. | Partner as an outsider
Need for inclusion |
| 20. I never had parenting issues with his kids. I enjoyed them. They were guests. I never felt like a parent. | Feels distant from her stepchildren who seem like guests; she doesn't feel like their parent and has no parenting issues with them. | Imbalance in stepparent/stepchild relationship |
| 21. I got disheartened when I never saw these kids converse with their dad. There were big walls around them. | Feels empathy for her partner seeing barriers between him and his children. | Negative perception of partner's social ability |
| 22. I felt like a facilitator- trying to get them to talk with their dad about the past or what they remembered. | Felt she was an "outsider" observing interactions between her partner and his children. | Rescuing intervention
Control |
| 23. I wanted to cheer him up by catering to his kids. | Tried "pleasing" her partner by catering to his children. | Benign control |
| 24. I have quite a lot of empathy for his former wife. | Feels frustration she experiences with her new partner likely existed for his former wife. | Blaming partner
Projection |
| 25. I stopped instigating with his kids. | Re-directs her energy by withdrawing initiatives with her stepchildren | Withdrawal by stepmother
Control |
| 26. I've distanced myself in our relationship and tried to do some of my own work and in relationship with my children, rather than try to fix all the wrongs in his relationship with them. | Takes responsibility for creating distance in her relationship with her new partner; focuses on herself, her children and withdraws from intervention with her partner's conflict with her children. | Withdrawal due to frustration
Control |

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| 27. I am critical and don't agree with his relationship with them. | Expresses anger about how her partner relates to her children | Criticism of partner
Clash of parental & stepparent values |
| 28. I made it work at great cost to me. I have a life pattern of demonstrating competency by trying to make an impossible situation better. | Expresses anger at her personal sacrifice in the process of stepfamily formation; sees this as part of her life pattern | Mother as pleaser
Control |
| 29. Our conflict involving my daughter right now feels too intense. I have a hunch I'll choose in favor of my daughter. | Feels the intensity of conflict with her partner about her daughter; feels her loyalty is with her daughter. | Kids vs outsider
Mom in the middle |
| 30. Trying to untangle from my daughter's special needs and needs as an adolescent is difficult. | Feels conflict about the difficulty in permitting her daughter's individuation. | Mother's enmeshment with children |
| 31. He directs the child, but he doesn't converse. That's a bone of contention between us. | Feels anger about her partner relating to her child from a one-up position. | Criticism of partner
Lack of dialogue |
| 32. The adult relationship is the most delicate flower in the garden. | Values the couple as a distinct subsystem in the stepfamily; expresses anxiety recognizing the couple's fragility | Tenuous primary relationship |
| 33. We had a potential for good stuff in the relationship, but we quickly got into the parenting stuff that had none of the joy or interest of the courtship. We don't have what we had in the beginning. | Grieves for the loss of the essential attraction in the adult relationship. | Sense of loss
Conflict of parenting vs couple interests |
| 34. He wanted me. He wanted this family. | Identifies her partner's attraction to both her and the stepfamily relationship. | Partner's needs for relationship and affiliation |
| 35. I felt very dependent when we got together. It was a weak point in my life. | Felt vulnerable at the time she committed to the stepfamily. | Recognition of neediness in the relationship |
| 36. The behavior I saw in courting wasn't the real animal. | Expresses anger that courtship did not provide her adequate information about how her new partner would function in the stepfamily. | Betrayal by partner |
| 37. I felt a lot of pressure from getting together so quickly. I heard alarm bells- slow down; stop this! | Recognizes dissociation in not attending to her own awareness of her need to control the pace of stepfamily formation. | Awareness of haste in stepfamily formation |
| 38. I asked him to move out at one point. All my instincts were saying, "This isn't going to work". But I kind of let myself get washed away. | Acknowledges responsibility for staying in a conflictive situation despite her awareness of its difficulties. | Need for autonomy
Guilt |
| 39. Professional skills in communication seem slow in transferring to my personal life. | Sees irony in the difference between what she is able to do professionally and personally. | Guilt
Shame |
| 40. Some primitive part of me chose this relationship for the wrong reasons- protection and someone to help care for the children. The other parts of me were not there in that decision. | Recognizes the dissociation of her need for comfort and her need for rational decision making. | Awareness of need for relationship |

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| 41. There was a part of me going counter to the things I'd learned and assessed. It wasn't about conscious choice. It felt safe, good, numb. | Recognizes the dissociation of her need for comfort and her rational capability. | Awareness of prepotency of need for relationship |
| 42. In my family, I felt appreciated when my parents asked me to do responsible things. I felt loved and respected in the family I grew up in. I felt depressed when I stayed home and tried to raise my kids. | Remembers feeling rewarded by responsibility in her family of origin and not experiencing this as a stay at home mother. | Awareness of need for self-fulfillment |
| 43. In my family, we all kind of read each other's minds and felt each other's feelings. | Recognizes learning an intuitive pattern of communication in her family of origin. | Patterns of intimacy from family of origin
Nostalgia |
| 44. I felt I understood my dad completely, and sort of lay it on the man I'm with that "If you really loved me, I'd be able to read your mind". It's like intimacy with no boundary. | Recognizes a pattern of intimacy based on intuition learned with her father and generalized to other men she loves | Intimacy without boundaries
Patterns from family of origin |
| 45. If mom had a tear in her eye, dad would boost us out of the house. No one was to upset mother. | Recognizes learning a pattern of avoiding conflict with her mother. | Nostalgia for past
Nostalgia for empathic communication |
| 46. There's a whole level of conversation going on in our family that's non-verbal. It's hypersensitive stuff that you can read each other's minds and assuming that you can hurt each other terribly. | Recognizes a pattern of unspoken communication with her children which has powerful negative potential. | Nostalgia for empathic communication |
| 47. I thought we should live separately or do something to get out of these horrible incidents which I felt were marking the kids for life. It turns out that they're fine. | Recognizes that conflict she considered damaging did not actually damage her children | Over-reaction to effects of conflict |
| 48. After we'd talk about separating, which was painful for him, I'd have this primitive feeling of comfort that came from thinking we could make this work better. | Recognizes rational decisions for conflict resolution were overridden by her need for comfort. | Need for hope and security |
| 49. We didn't learn from weathering the storms. We didn't have a strong enough base to share as partners. | Realizes sharing a strong base with her partner was necessary for learning and growing from conflict. | Irreconcilable differences in primary relationship |
| 50. We were like sailors lashed to the mast to prevent being tossed off the deck during a storm. When the storm stopped we felt numb and sore and needed comfort. | Recognizes that stepfamily structure held members in conflict and left them feeling damaged and in need of comfort | Relationship as an ordeal |
| 51. As a "team" coming through this didn't feel like a victory. It felt like we all lost. So there's no bond. | Recognizes that conflict created distance rather than bonding | Failure
Loss of hope |
| 52. I envy couples who are still in their forties and have been together since their twenties. They seem to have so much history, stability- they appear to have a gorgeous life. | Idealizes the traditional nuclear family. | Longing for stability, security |
| 53. I want to be a stable independent woman with a reasonable kind of lifestyle- planning for retirement so that if I'm in a relationship, it's a relationship I choose and that I want. | Expresses her plan for choice, independence and self-determination. | Need for autonomy and security |

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| 54. For my own stubbornness and independence, I can't handle a relationship that I <u>need</u> . That just feels sick to me. | Expresses how much she values independence and devalues need. | Awareness of susceptibility to need driven relationship |
| 55. I get more support and give or are more support in a community of friends than I do in a relationship. | Realizes that she functions better in a community of friends than in a relationship. | Acknowledges relationship difficulties |
| 56. I want to be a completely independent person in a community. And there's a contradiction between the two, but there is the feeling that you can stand alone or affiliate by choice, not from need. | Expresses valuing the freedom to affiliate by choice. | Struggles for autonomy
Autonomy vs Need |
| 57. Couples in the olden days got together got together because they needed each other; money, someone to protect while the women bore the children. I don't need any of that stuff. | Realizes that she rejects the values underlying traditional family formation. | Denial of traditional values |
| 58. The less involved the children's father is, the more they idealize him. | Recognizes that the more her children's father was absent, the more they idealized him. | Absent parent idealized |
| 59. When my daughter was younger, the longer she went without seeing him, the more creative she was in how he would be. When she saw him again, it would bring her back to how he really was. | Recognizes that her daughter's idealized image of her father became more realistic through contact with him. | Absent parent idealized |
| 60. My oldest son has a reciprocal supportive relationship with his dad. I feel good about that. | Acknowledges good feelings about a positive relationship between her former husband and their son. | Post-divorce father-child relationship |
| 61. My former husband was quite active with all three children. But that relationship deteriorated when we separated. | Recognizes the negative effect on the relationship between her children and their father due to reduced contact following marital separation | Effects of divorce on parent-child relationship |
| 62. Their father's absence made the kids idealize him and turn their stepfather into the "bad dad". | Recognizes that in their father's absence her children created an idealized image of him, and concurrently, a negative image of their stepfather. | Odious comparison of father-stepfather |
| 63. If the kids' father had have spent more time with them, my new partner and I would have become stronger as a couple through spending more time together. Also, my new partner wouldn't have felt so compelled to be involved with the children in a disciplinary way. | Recognizes that more involvement by her former husband with their children would have given more time for her new adult partnership and possibly provided an option for more positive interaction between her partner and her children. | Influence of "absent parent" on stepfather's role as parent |
| 64. I really kind of kick myself for not asking for joint custody. I wanted custody to be with me and for him to have full access. | Expresses anger about her choice of custody arrangement. | Regret over custody control |

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| 65. What we did with the joint custody procedure, the kids spent quite a bit of time with him initially, but I, in theory had custody. I think that cuts the other parent out and it's like they divorce their family. I don't think a parent should have to divorce their children. I think they should divorce their partner. | Expresses regret with the custody arranged, as it created distance between her children and their father. | Regrets over custody control |
| 66. There wasn't a lot known about joint custody at that time. I was afraid. If I'd have pursued it, he would have been very willing. | Recognizes her fear and lack of knowledge as factors in determining the custody arrangement. | Regrets over custody control |
| 67. The children have stayed loyal to their mother and father. | Acknowledges her children's loyalty to their biological parents. | Perseverance of nuclear family |
| 68. They've idealized me and been very hard on their stepmom. | Recognizes the idealized image her children have of her and the distorted negative image they have of their stepmother. | Children's contrasted image of natural and stepparents |
| 69. Their stepmom is a regular human being and doesn't deserve labeling "Witch of the North" | Expresses empathy for her children's stepmother, who she feels as being unfairly labelled. | Children's negativity directed at stepparent |
| 70. The children still saw themselves as having to side with their natural parents, in spite of quite a bit of counselling and consciously trying to separate. Unconsciously, the loyalty was still there. | Recognizes that her children's loyalty to their biological parents occurs at an unconscious level and creates a bond even when they consciously try to separate. | Children's loyalty to parents; Hostility to stepparents |
| 71. The "good" parents were mom and dad. The bad guys were the stepparents. Yeah- "Witches and Trolls". | Identifies unfair labelling of "good" biological parents, "bad" stepparents. | Children's polarized view Loyalty to parents Hostility to stepparents |
| 72. I feel like I need to spend more time reflecting on our history. Sometimes we were in so much crisis. I forget the number of years we spent trying to make this stuff work. There have been so many crises I would rather not think about, I tend to push it all down. In fact, thinking about them reminds me of some good stuff, too. | Recognizes the importance of reflecting on the entire history of the relationship, as many positive aspects embedded in crisis may be overlooked in editing | Ambivalence about stepfamily involvement |
| 73. It feels like an awful lot of what's gone on before needs to be exorcised- it's like there are bad spirits- to get back to "is there some good stuff?" | Identifies her need for purging in order to evaluate the essential positive qualities of the stepfamily. | Unresolved stepfamily issues Dissonance from past |
| 74. Money, and time and energy and a lot of wasted effort and a lot of garbage. It's quite a pile up. It's like a house cleaning ceremony. | Identifies resources wasted and cluttering the image of the stepfamily. | Regrets about relationship failure |
| 75. If I look back and judge myself, I would say I lack boundaries. Like, I lack the ability to say, "No, I have to slow this down." | Recognizes her responsibility for not creating boundaries and slowing the pace of stepfamily formation. | Awareness of neediness & impulsiveness |
| 76. Now I have the opportunity to go back and have boundaries, and to say, "What is in this relationship if I do say, "No, we've got to slow it down." | Realizes she has an opportunity to exercise her responsibility to create boundaries and slow down the process of family formation. | Wish for empowerment & control |

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| 77. At times it feels like a loss, like I'm ruining the relationship, and like I'll be a sad old lady who lives alone. And then another part of me feels that this is a part of my personal growth and this is vital to find out if there is something in the relationship at all. | Acknowledges conflicting feelings of potential loss and growth in evaluating the relationship with her partner. | Fear & insecurity vs autonomy & growth
Ambivalence |
| 78. Do I feel better alone or together?
Do we like each other? | Poses evaluative questions basic to continuing the relationship with her partner. | Questioning stepfamily involvement |
| 79. Even from talking about this, we're getting along better. So the fact of discussing separation makes us treat each other with more respect. | Recognizes the process of discussing whether "to be or not to be" has improved their relationship | Dialogue creates hope |
| 80. There was a show on TV the other night, two cops, male and female, who'd been through all kinds of stuff over the years- whatever, shootouts and so on. That's sort of what our relationship is like. Being in a patrol car for nine years. | Identifies an image of couple in a stepfamily relationship as partners dealing with conflict in a patrol car. | History of conflict |
| 81. It's time to get out of the car, to see if there's a social life or anything else, or if in fact we've been good partners, but there's not a lot left. | Expresses her need to critically evaluate the relationship on its merits rather than structure. | Evaluation of the stepfamily relationship |
| 82. I didn't get a strong feeling that my partner felt threatened by my kids' relationship with their dad. | Children's relationship with their father is not seen as threatening her partner. | Presence of former spouse |
| 83. It's my hunch that he would have learned better in a simpler situation. With all the kids around, it was really a very complex situation. | Realizes that learning new ways of interacting with her children would have been easier for partner if the stepfamily had been less complex. | Recognition of stepfamily complexity |
| 84. In the beginning, with my former husband taking more responsibility for the kids, we actually got some alone time. It didn't stop all the crises, but we did have some fun. | Recognizes that the effective functioning of boundaries enhances the quality of experience for stepfamily subsystems. | Effects of establishing boundaries
Importance of time for relationship development |
| 85. I saw my partner's repertoire of skills he used with other kids decrease as he became involved with our family. I didn't see him use all that spontaneous behaviour with my children. | Expresses resentment seeing her new partner being less spontaneous and socially skillful interacting with her children than with others. Positive interaction decreased with more involvement. | Diminution of partner's talents |
| 86. It was as if he couldn't see himself as a friend to them, only as a "father". He was stuck in that role. | Expresses anger that her partner could only respond to her children in an authoritative rather than an affirming manner. | Stepfather resented as an authority |
| 87. He did all kinds of driving them around and getting them places and a lot of the brute labor of raising kids this age. I don't think the children appreciated it. | Acknowledges her partner's positive contribution to parenting tasks, even though this was not appreciated by her children. | Sympathy for lack of appreciation for stepfather's efforts |

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| 88. One time he went to the mountains for a week and took on one of my kids with him. I didn't get the impression that they had a good time. | Acknowledges that a special effort by her partner to initiate activity with one of her children did not result in a positive outcome for either. | Kids don't enjoy stepfather; Stepfather unrewarded by stepchildren |
| 89. I felt he could be more spontaneous, more playful, more friendly with others. I feel real badly saying that, because I'm sure in nine years he's done a multitude of good things. | Expresses regret that interactions with her children were not viewed as positively as those with others. | Guilt feelings over discounting partner. |
| 90. I saw the more he would try to do things, the less things would come back, and the more rigid he'd get. So it would perpetuate less spontaneous, playful, person-to person stuff. | Expresses regret that initiatives by her partner with her children were rewarded on the basis of diminishing returns, consequently reducing their positive quality. | Seeing partner's dilemma |
| 91. I see him as his dad was. He vowed never to be like his dad but as he gets more and more into that, it's my hunch he gets depressed more and more. | Realizes that her partner is depressed by "fathering" in a pattern learned in his family of origin. | Seeing partner's dilemma |
| 92. I think he interpreted my trying to talk with him as criticism. I'd comment on the physical things- that looked aggressive and dominating. It was hard for him to hear that sort of thing. I tried a number of different ways. | Expresses frustration in her attempts at providing constructive feedback to her partner being interpreted as criticism. | Attempts to change partner |
| 93. It's a real scapegoat situation, where he's the scapegoat. I have trouble imagining that particular person succeeding in that particular family. | Recognizes that for her partner the stepfamily was a "no win" situation. | Recognition of partner's plight Scapegoating |
| 94. It was like no matter what he did it was wrong. | Recognizes the futility of her partner's efforts in the stepfamily | Recognition of partner's plight Scapegoating |
| 95. It appeared to me to be a wrestling match to see who would be the scapegoat in the family. I'm in there somewhere. Nobody's the bad guy, but you're all wearing me out. I do feel helpless with that. I don't like the scapegoating situation. | Expresses her frustration and sense of helplessness in attempting to intervene in the stepfamily power struggle. | Mother in the middle Frustration with stepfamily dynamic |
| 96. Scapegoating echoed some uncomfortable patterns for me. | Expresses her discomfort with the dynamics of scapegoating. | Empathy with scapegoat |
| 97. It's like we're divinely damaged when we interact. | Expresses feeling powerless to change the dynamics of the stepfamily interaction. | Fatalistic view of relationship Inability to break stepfamily dynamic |
| 98. It's like there's four of them chasing each other around playing scapegoat tag, and me trying to make them happy. | Expresses her frustration with her role in the stepfamily scenario. | Caught in the middle Scapegoating Frustration Mother as "pleaser" |
| 99. I was like the mother to the whole bunch. I've often said, "I want a partner, not another child". | Expresses her frustration with not experiencing her partner as an adult equal. | Resenting unequal partnership, stepfamily dynamic |

- | | | |
|--|---|--|
| 100. I felt like a referee in a game, and I don't even like games. That's how I became more or less distanced. As I lost the person I was relating to as an equal and more and more felt like I was parenting four children, not three, I became quite cold and am still quite cold. | Recognizes her responsibility in creating and maintaining emotional distance in her relationship with her partner as she sensed losing him as an adult equal and becoming a parental figure to him. | Mother caught in the middle
Resenting loss of partnership
Emotional withdrawal |
| 101. He could have got power by building one on one relationships with each of us, trying to focus on the good, not on the person who was being a real creep. | Recognizes that her partner could have become empowered through developing individual relationships with stepfamily members, and focussing on positive rather than negative elements. | Criticism of partner |
| 102. To try to relate to us as a group, when we had been together for so long, been through so much and had so much baggage, I think would have been destined for failure no matter how skilled he was. | Realizes the complexity of their family history and the near impossibility of relating to her family as a group. | Stepfamily complexity
Seeing partner's plight |
| 103. I don't think he could have related to us as a group until he had a strong one on one relationship with each of us, and primarily with me. | Recognizes the importance of her partner developing individual relationships, particularly with her as a partner, before attempting to her family as a group. | Retrospective evaluation of relationship
Importance of primary relationship |
| 104. Assuming that I was more important than the family, more time needed to go into building a relationship with me, and less into critiquing my parenting style or changing the kids or trying to control them. | Recognizes the importance of her partner building an affirmative relationship with her, rather than critiquing or instituting changes. | Importance of primary relationship
Defensiveness over parenting |
| 105. I think control behavior is just the dumbest thing in the world for a stepfather to attempt. "Let me into your family so I can set things straight." | Expresses disdain for stepfathers in general who attempt controlling behavior. | Resenting partner's control/intrusion |
| 106. So there's this pattern of what they think a father should be and a pattern is the key word because there's no spontaneity. So how do you develop a relationship when you're lacking in spontaneity. | Expresses frustration with stepfathers generally who she believes are rigid and not able to interact spontaneously in stepfamilies. | Condemning partner's rigidity
Longing for spontaneity |
| 107. Love, intimacy....a lot of those things come through gifts of time and play. Listening. All the more. They're really kind of child-like things. Just to be full of wonder for that other person. | Identifies closeness with unstructured time, wonder, and playfulness. | Ideals of time/play in a relationship |
| 108. Building trust. Giving is a part of how trust gets built. Giving time. Giving energy. | Identifies closeness built on trust, giving of time and energy. | Ideal of giving in a relationship |
| 109. What draws people together in a loving relationship is fun, support, nurturing. Kind of a refuge from the storm of life. Feeling enriched, not like therapy and more structure. | Identifies closeness with warmth, support and protection; distance with analysis and structure. | Ideal of fun in a relationship |
| 110. I have to be very clear on what I think is a home, what I know is home, and how home feels before I can start to transit that to people around me. It's me defining a home and living that. | Realizes that in order for her to show leadership in developing a "home" she must be clear about her own image. | Need for identification of ideals of home
Responsibility for own needs |

111. This process is like me holding my
life in my hands and saying, "Well,
what do I really want out of this life,
and what am I trying to create as a
parent."

Recognizes her responsibility
in creating what she wants
her life to be.

Responsibility for
her own future

Table 8
Higher Order Thematic Descriptions of Diana's Stepfamily Experience

Thematic Clusters	Generalized Descriptions
1. Stepfamily Formation as an Ordeal (11, 12, 32, 47, 49, 50, 51, 55, 72, 73, 74, 83, 104)	First year of stepfamily development was "hell"; progressed to more stability but never settled; adult relationship was vulnerable to family conflict; worried conflict would damage her children; felt distance rather than closeness from "weathering the storms", damaged and in need of comfort as a result of crises; positive events are embedded in a history of crisis; needs to purge past; energy directed to stepfamily formation feels like a waste, toxic to present experience; complexity of stepfamily form made adaptive learning difficult for both partners;
2. Learning from Stepfamily Experience (1, 2, 6, 7, 37, 76, 80, 81, 92, 93)	Commitment to forming a stepfamily would not be her choice now; experience heightens awareness of responsibility for past and present choices; joining of stepfamilies' life-worlds felt rushed, "missing" leisurely shared time and a ceremony of transformation to a new family form; feels frustrated that attempts at feedback to her partner were interpreted as criticism; sees his plight as a "no win" situation; stepfamily's conflicted history makes primary relationship seem like a vehicle for crisis intervention; functions better in a "community of friends" than in a stepfamily relationship; evaluates plans for departure.
3. Prepotency of Needs in Stepfamily Formation (3, 4, 5, 8, 34, 35, 36, 40, 41, 42, 48, 52, 53, 54, 56, 58, 75)	Stepfamily formation was rushed; based on mutual needs for adult companionship, inclusion and support in a family form; controlled pacing of stepfamily formation overridden by mutual needs, creating stress for members; D felt weak and dependant; her partner sought companionship and family. D felt deceived by his courtship behavior; dissociated need for rational decisions from need for comfort and safety; recognizes need for self-fulfillment; recognizes susceptibility to a need driven relationship; feels vulnerable in awareness of neediness and impulsiveness; idealizes nuclear family stability and security; needs autonomy and security.

4. Stepparent as an Outsider
(10, 13, 15, 19, 20, 58, 63, 86, 88, 97, 103,)
Rarely saw her stepchildren; experienced them as guests; had no parenting issues with them; D's children clung to fantasy of nuclear family reconciliation, idealizing absent father and rejecting her new partner. Kids wanted him out; he wanted one of them out; he attempted inclusion through authority; stepfather issues amplified by minimal contact between the children and father; D is angry partner was authoritative not affirming with her children; they didn't enjoy him; he was unrewarded for efforts with them; feels fatalistic toward inability to change dysfunctional dynamics of the primary relationship crucial to stepfamily functioning.
5. The Struggle for Power
(14, 15, 16, 18, 27, 29, 30, 33, 95, 98, 99, 100)
Struggle for power in rivalry between her partner and sons for her exclusive affection and attention; clashes with partner on parenting styles; critical of his rigid approaches; resents imposition of discipline on her children; forms an alliance with her daughter; feels enmeshed with her; frustrated trying to please everyone; in the midst of power struggle; senses a loss of her partner as an equal; refuses to "parent" him.
6. Impermeability of Existing Boundaries
(9, 17, 58, 59, 69, 70, 71, 82, 84)
Children's relationship with their father does not interfere with stepfather's relationship; they express hostility to stepparents and "unconscious loyalty" to biological parents; the less contact D's children have with their father the more they idealize him; D's daughter is more affected by her stepfather moving in than by her father's remarriage; primary relationship is best during time spent as "a couple"; couple had time when children were with their father.
7. Watching the Catastrophe
(21, 24, 31, 85, 87, 91, 92, 94, 101, 102, 105, 106)
Sees her partner's dilemma: depressed by "fathering as his father did"; his contribution of "brute labor" to parenting is unappreciated by her children; he's in a "no win" situation; empowerment might have occurred through strong individual relationships with each; residual nuclear family has complexity and closed boundaries. D resents her partner's failure to integrate "spontaneous" social skills with her children and communication from a "one-up" position; feels disdain for men, generally, who lack spontaneity in stepfamily interactions and seek inclusion through control; critical of partner's focus on negative aspects of stepfamily interactions; sees him lacking in ability to communicate with his children and empathizes with frustration of his former wife.

8. Rescue, Control and Abandonment
(22, 23, 25, 26, 28, 95)

Tried pleasing her partner by catering to his children and facilitating their interactions; grew disheartened; stopped instigating; "pleasing" behavior is part of her life pattern; feels helpless and frustrated as an intermediary in power struggles between her partner and her children; creates distance from her partner and his stepparenting conflicts, focuses on herself and relationships with her children; resents her sacrifice in efforts to make the stepfamily "work".

9. Feelings of Guilt for Lack of Discernment
(38, 39, 64, 65, 66, 89)

Regrets arranging child custody seen as distancing her children from their father; feels guilty for ignoring "alarm" bells" about relationship pacing and compatibility; failed to utilize professional skills in the personal context of the stepfamily; knowingly stayed in a conflictive situation; feels badly for devaluing good things her partner has done with her children.

10. Nostalgia
(43, 44, 45, 46, 60, 61, 62, 67, 68, 96, 107, 108, 109, 110, 111)

D maintains from her family of origin a pattern of intuitive communication synonymous with intimacy; experiences analysis and structure as creating distance; misses closeness identified with trust developed through unstructured playful activity; seeks intimacy identified with trust, warmth, support and protection; "scapegoating" stirs discomfoting memories of experience in her family of origin; shares hypersensitivity with her children to the negative potential in empathic communication; children idealize her and their father. D "feels good" about her former husband's relationship with their son; acknowledges his positive fathering during marriage and its deterioration following separation.

11. Fear and Insecurity vs. Autonomy and Growth
(77, 78)

Present state of D's relationship with partner calls for a choice to be a part of it or a part from it; feels hopeful from opening a dialog with partner about their future.

An Integrated Paraphrase of Diana's Experience of a
Stepfamily

Diana's experience in a stepfamily is a process of realization precipitated through adversity. She understands what home and family mean to her and that she is responsible for their creation.

Involvement with her partner came at a time when she felt weak, dependent, and in need of support. She regrets her need based decision to live in a stepfamily, and the resulting series of disappointments and disillusionment in difficulties, unmet needs and unfulfilled expectations. "Weathering storms" in the stepfamily takes her to a new awareness of wanting autonomy and heightens her sense of responsibility for achieving it. She realizes her strength is within herself. The autonomy she seeks now conflicts with the support that attracted her to this relationship initially. Diana now "holds her life in her own hands" asking and taking responsibility for living the answer to the question, "What do I really want out of this life?".

Diana felt vulnerable in the way her stepfamily was formed. She was drawn to her partner by a "primitive", "unconscious" part of herself, seeking support and protection, something that felt "safe, good, numb". While she was aware of "alarm bells" warning that the relationship wouldn't work, she let herself "get washed away", needing him and feeling needed by him. Diana felt powerless to slow down their courtship or initiate a ceremony to make stepfamily

formation special. Discovering she did not know the "real animal" before committing herself to the stepfamily left her feeling angry and betrayed.

Struggles over parenting eclipsed the "good things" Diana shared with her partner. Their relationship "the most delicate flower in the garden", withered as she became emotionally distant from him. Surviving emotional "storms" left her with no sense of victory, feeling damaged and in need of comfort as the stepfamily lacked a "team" bond. Conflicts between her children and partner seemed like a scapegoating game, with her caught in the middle, an unwilling referee. He seemed like "one of the children", "no longer an equal". Diana mourned in anger her loss of a partner. She saw his dilemma as a no win situation. She opposed his rigid authoritarian approaches with her children and resented his intrusion into her family "so he could set things straight".

Diana "feels sick" being in a relationship she "needs", and seeks autonomy through "affiliation by choice". Her past efforts to make the stepfamily work seem a "sacrifice". Her life-long pattern of pleasing others, "making the impossible manageable" is played out in the stepfamily. Attempts to "please everyone" by rescuing them from conflicts, fail. She withdraws, taking only responsibility for her own relationships with each family member. Diana longs for spontaneity and a kind of closeness with her partner which

she experienced with her father and shares with her children; "mind reading", "intimacy without boundaries".

Diana's growing need for autonomy threatens her relationship with her partner. She ponders her future by taking stock of what they share. She sees "good stuff" buried in their difficult history. She wishes for an exorcism of pain from the past which poisons her present experience. She feels caught between fear at the prospect of leaving security, and excitement at the prospect of moving toward potential growth and fulfillment.

Level Five

At Level 5, a synthesis of integrated paraphrases of men's and women's experiences results in a fundamental description of each gender's experience of the stepfamily. This procedure involves a systematic interpretation, paraphrasing and thematizing of each co-researcher's protocol.

A Fundamental Description of How a Man Experiences Living
With a Woman Who Has Children

A man experiences ambivalence in living with a woman who has children; he wants to satisfy his needs for love and personal affirmation with her, but fears losing a sense of himself in adapting to the stepfamily. A man idealizes "home" as a physical and emotional space offering security and fulfillment in his own pursuits. As attempts to realize this ideal are repeatedly frustrated, a man confronts the question of whether or not to continue his involvement in the stepfamily.

In forming a stepfamily, a man is alarmed at "getting more than he bargained for". He is overwhelmed by the presence of a woman's children and reminders of her former nuclear family, ongoing sources of discomfort. His sense of intimacy with her diminishes as he encounters the primacy and historical depth of her emotional bond with her children. Although determined to make his relationship with her work, a

man feels his commitment weaken when conflict threatens to destroy their emotional closeness or when his sense of himself is threatened by adapting to the stepfamily.

A man struggles to affirm himself by establishing his presence in a stepfamily. When his initiatives at leadership are resented or resisted, he feels discounted and angry. A man does not want to take the place of his stepchildren's father. He knows how to be a father but as a stepfather feels limited ways he can participate meaningfully with his stepchildren. Feelings of emotional closeness he experiences with his biological children do not exist with his stepchildren. Negative feelings toward stepchildren create conflict within himself. At a rational level, he recognizes their legitimate place in a shared home. When he "wishes them gone" a man feels guilty about his lack of tolerance. Uninvited feelings of animosity toward stepchildren cause a man to doubt his human values.

A man feels vulnerable exposing his frustration with the stepfamily to his partner. By expressing it, he risks her anger and loss of emotional closeness with her. By repressing it, he feels emotionally isolated and carries residual anger within himself. He wants his partner to acknowledge his negative feelings about stepfamily issues without condemning him. He feels affirmed when she understands his feelings; hurt and discounted when he is misunderstood. Issues involving a woman's children hold the threat of igniting emotionally damaging conflict between them. A man feels

powerless in the face of these ongoing and seemingly unresolvable issues.

Fantasizing about leaving the stepfamily, a man recalls from his experience of being "single" both the joy of freedom and the pain of loneliness. He knows he has the strength to walk away from the stepfamily, but fears the loss of his loving relationship with a woman.

A Fundamental Description of How a Woman Who has Children Experiences Living with a Man

A woman with children lives with a man in an attempt to realize her ideal of "home"; a physical and emotional space where she can share an adult love, feeling secure and supported rearing her children. A woman feels overwhelmed by providing both physically and emotionally for her children, and seeks a man's strength and support. She experiences disappointment in her attempt to realize the creation of "home" with a man.

During courtship, a woman is seduced by developing a fantasy of her romantic ideal of home. When the stepfamily is formed, she feels betrayed and angry as her new partner attempts to initiate changes in "her" family, "saving them from themselves" or "setting things straight". A woman resents a man's "intrusion" in her day-to-day activities with her children. She is insecure about the adequacy of her "single" parenting and sees a man's initiatives for change as

a violation of her rights and responsibilities as a parent and attacks on her competency.

A woman believes that she understands intuitively what her children think and feel. She expects a man to know her thoughts and feelings, and is hurt and angry when he does not. When her partner and her children are in conflict, she defends her children. A woman fears that her conflict with her partner will damage her children. She feels responsible for keeping peace in the stepfamily, and finds herself caught in the middle of conflicts. Wearied by unsuccessful attempts to satisfy needs of both her partner and her children, she withdraws emotionally from a man. An intimate history with her children and her own expectations of motherhood make her sympathetic to their needs. A man's demands competing with her children's make him seem infantile and she is disappointed as he becomes a burden rather than a support.

A woman longs for play and spontaneity as a way of bonding in the stepfamily, and resents a man's attempts to gain recognition through authoritative approaches. Struggling with a man for power in the stepfamily threatens a woman's sense of autonomy. The male strength that attracted her to the relationship initially, becomes threatening. Frustration and anger over unresolved conflicts destroy her emotional closeness with her partner.

As conflicts become unbearable, a woman evaluates whether she and her children will continue to live with a man. In conflicts involving mother-children-stepfather, a

woman sides with her children in identifying a man as the scapegoat for stepfamily strife. She feels vulnerable in rejecting his support but chooses to expel the intruding man as a way of restoring family peace and her own autonomy.

Level Six

This final level of analysis is a reduction of the syntheses presented at Level 5. Here I recognize the data is a series of incomplete profiles, each revealing a perspective on the phenomenon. It is at this level that the essence of the experience is described. This is the essential description, no longer situated in concrete instances of its appearance.

"In so far as the essence is to be grasped through lived experience, it is concrete knowledge. But in so far as I grasp something through this experience which is more than a contingent fact, an intelligible structure that imposes itself on me whenever I think of the intentional object in question, I gain another kind of knowledge. I attain insight which holds for all men. I get beyond my singularity not in so far as my consciousness is merely a series of facts or events but in so far as these events have a sense. The intuition of essences is simply a regaining of this sense, which is not thematized in our spontaneous, unreflective descriptions" (Merleau-Ponty. 1964, p. 54-55).

The essential description of how men experience living with a woman who has children, and how women who have children experience living with a man, results from an application of the phenomenological method; it describes the researcher's understanding of the phenomenon. The essential structure remains invariable throughout its concrete, or situated instances. This structure lies before the experience, and is revealed through experience and reflection. It is an a priori understanding which comes before knowledge. Psychological understanding consists of experience and reflection to discover the meaning revealed through individual lived situations.

The lived experience of forming a stepfamily is largely a social phenomenon of adults in the post-war "baby-boom" generation. Most stepfamilies are formed from the remnants of divorced families. Remarriage has been sardonically referred to as the triumph of hope over experience (Rakoff, 1988). The psychological processes of divorced men and women in the demise of their first marriages, includes grieving the loss of what that relationship meant to them, adjusting to being "single" again, and then attempting to form a lasting relationship with a person who has similar experiences, while accommodating children from previous marriages (Carter & McGoldrick, 1980). Here we examine the lived experience of men and women who enter stepfamilies with histories of previous marriage and divorce. Formation of stepfamilies represents an important transition in their life cycles.

The recency of the stepfamily phenomenon precludes establishment of normative processes in the form of expected roles, behaviours and descriptive language. In the case of a man who lives with a woman who has children, and vice-versa, there are few rules of behavior. Words used to describe stepfamily relationships are awkward and vague in meaning. As a result, the relationship is experienced but in a context of limited understanding.

The Essential Description of how men experience living with a woman who has children, and how women who have children experience living with a man, is a description of the phenomenon as understood by the researcher. This understanding is not the co-researcher's understanding, as s/he lives the experience pre-reflectively. It is the product of the researcher's application of the phenomenological reduction to the several instances of the experience, as lived by individual subjects. This final level of the reduction provides the structural, generalized description of the phenomenon across time and situations.

An Essential Description of How Men Experience Living With a Woman Who Has Children

The essential description of how men experience living with a woman who has children, is a narration developed from general themes in men's protocols. Five general psychological themes central to men's experience of the stepfamily are revealed in the phenomenological analysis of their

descriptions. While these themes are experienced as an integral part of a man's participation in the stepfamily, they are presented here in isolation for the sake of emphasis.

Men's Common Themes

An essential description of a men's stepfamily experience includes the following common themes:

1. Ambivalence and self-doubt; Confusion about wanting in or wanting out of the stepfamily.
2. Feeling alienated by a woman's former family structure; Frustration with its resistance to change.
3. Feeling powerless as a stepparent
4. Resentment of a woman's emotional bond with her children
5. Fear of losing his sense of self through: not being affirmed by a woman, and by losing sight of his own needs in attempts to accommodate others in the stepfamily.

Narration of Themes Common to Men's Experience of a Stepfamily

As a man joins a woman who has children to form a stepfamily, he believes what he wants to believe; that in their shared home his gratifying relationship with a woman will be secure. Initially, he acknowledges and accepts her children at a rational level. However, in sharing a home, he feels violated by their presence and activities. Surrounded by the unfamiliar, remnants of a woman's former nuclear family, he is a stranger in his own home. Ongoing discomfort

frustrates him. Pursuing his idealized relationship with a woman into a stepfamily, he feels deceived. Subsequent anger is directed at his partner, her children, and ultimately at himself.

A man enters a stepfamily with a sense of freedom and independence he experienced following his divorce. He seeks a relationship with a woman and inherits unwanted vestiges of her former nuclear family. He believes his intimate relationship with her is at the centre of their new home. Discovering her intimate connection with her children and a history he does not share, he feels betrayed and angry. Anger affects his perception of himself and his relationships with others. He experiences being in the stepfamily as intruding. Activities of a woman's former nuclear family seem to exclude him. Feeling hurt and devalued, he withdraws socially and emotionally, confirming his status as an outsider.

A man wants a woman's full attention when they are together. He resents the disruptive presence of her children. His valued relationship with a woman seems secondary to her connection with them. Paradoxically, his attempts to ensure the primacy of their adult relationship are self defeating, creating emotional distance from her, and confirming his sense that there is no place for him in the stepfamily.

Wanting to make the stepfamily home feel more like "his", a man questions existing patterns in parenting, socializing, and activities within their home. As change is resisted or resented he feels discounted and powerless. He

wants a woman to understand his negative feelings about stepfamily issues. When she sides with her children, he feels discounted as a man. In conflicts with his stepchildren, he sees only losing outcomes. If he deals directly with his stepchildren, their mother defends them and he feels defeated. If he addresses her about conflicts with them, he predicts her angry and hurtful responses. Withholding his frustration with stepfamily issues, he he feels emotionally isolated and angry.

Over time, a man despairs, realizing he may never be "at home" living with a woman who has children. He resents her being so connected with her children and feels displaced by them. He is not close to his stepchildren and resents accommodating them. He fears losing his sense of himself in attempts to accommodate the needs of other stepfamily members. He wants to be affirmed by a woman but fears that conflict will destroy their closeness.

An Essential Description of How Women Who Have Children Experience Living With a Man

The essential description of how women who have children experience living with a man, is a narration developed from common themes in women's protocols. Five general psychological themes central to women's experience of the stepfamily are revealed in the phenomenological analysis of their descriptions. While these themes are experienced as an integral part of a woman's participation in the stepfamily,

they are presented here in isolation for the sake of emphasis.

Women's Common Themes

An essential description of a women's stepfamily experience includes the following common themes:

1. Disillusionment with the stepfamily as a child rearing haven; Disappointment with her partner
2. Possessive of the stepfamily as "hers"; Defensive of existing family structures; Resentful of a man's initiatives for change
3. Defensive of her "right" as a parent
4. Increased emotional closeness with her children; Decreased emotional closeness with her partner
5. Fear of losing her autonomy as the head of the family and her identity in relationship with her children.

Narration of Themes Common to Women's Experience of a Stepfamily

Although she is divorced, a woman with children has a strong sense of family. As a "single parent" her life is centered around her children to the extent that she feels overwhelmed. She forms a stepfamily fantasizing that the support of a man will restore her sense of wholeness within the remnants of her former nuclear family. She wants a man to be both a partner to her and a parent to her children. Realizing that a man's emotional connection is with her and not her children, a woman feels she has been seduced by her fantasy of family and betrayed by the limit of a man's love.

A woman supports her children in maintaining the memory of their former nuclear family. She has strong convictions about her style of parenting. She reacts angrily to a man's attempts to initiate changes in what she and her children have shared as a family. A woman blames a man for failing to develop emotional closeness with her children. Over time, she loses faith in him and withdraws emotionally from their relationship.

A woman sees her emotional connection with her children as the centre of the stepfamily. She believes she understands their feelings intuitively. This is closeness of a kind she does not share with a man. When her children are in conflict with him, a woman feels that he is in conflict with her, too. Ongoing conflicts between her children and her partner erode a woman's good feeling about him as a person and about her relationship with him.

A woman with children is defensive of her perception of her role as the head and the heart of "her" family. She resents a man making directive decisions affecting her children. She is emotionally close to them, imagines their sense of vulnerability, and wants to protect them. Her bond with them feels intensified when they are threatened by conflict with a man. In "her" home, a man seems like an intruder, in conflict with her children and wanting to take control. A woman reacts angrily, withdrawing emotionally from a man who is interfering with how "her" family operates.

A woman feels deeply connected with her children. They seem a part of her, both physically and emotionally. A man's presence in the stepfamily is an intrusion upon her intimacy with them. Her autonomy as the adult head of the family feels threatened. She joins her children in blaming him for destroying family peace by creating conflicts. A woman is disillusioned with her ideal of creating a stepfamily as a haven for child rearing. A man loses his attractiveness to her. She empowers herself by expelling him from the stepfamily as a way of maintaining her autonomy and identity in relationship with her children.

Combined Men's and Women's Themes

Five essential themes shared in experiences of both men and women are combined and presented below. Two perspectives of the stepfamily represented in the experience of men and women reveal the essential structure of the stepfamily phenomenon itself:

Essential Themes in Stepfamily Structure

1. Differing stepfamily ideals; men idealize developing their relationship with a woman; women idealize sharing child rearing with a man
2. Stepfamily form based on conflicting patterns: men seek inclusion by affecting change; women protect existing structures of single parent households
3. Competition for relationship primacy: men compete with a woman's children for primacy in relation with her; women defend intimate bonds with their children.

4. Power struggles centered on the "right" to parent: men feel powerless as stepparents; women defend their "right" as parents.
5. Fear of loss of identity: men fear loss of affirmation by a woman, and losing a sense of self through accommodation ; women fear a loss of autonomy as heads of their family and loss of identity in relationship with their children

The following narrative combines essential themes of men's and women's experience of a stepfamily. Metaphoric images are used to describe stepfamily structures and processes. The usefulness and limitations of metaphoric descriptions lie side by side. They are useful in anchoring concepts in the familiar or physical world and at the same time transcend a particular situation. Metaphoric descriptions are limited in that while we may use them as "maps" they do not permit us to experience the actual "territory" (Watts, 1964). Using co-researcher's combined themes as maps, we may gain an understanding of how men and women experience living in a stepfamily in a way which transcends their situated circumstances.

A Narration of Essential Themes in Men's and Women's Experience of a Stepfamily

In attempting to realize individual ideals of home, both men and women are disappointed in the stepfamily reality and in expectations of their partners. Attempts at establishing a unified stepfamily form result in confusion about who is on the "team" and how the "game" is played. Competition between a man and a woman's children for primacy in relationship with

her alienates "the couple". Ongoing power struggles between men and women over the "right" to parent in the stepfamily raise questions of inclusion and control. Both men and women fear the loss of identity in stepfamily formation, and confront an existential question of courage.

The polarities of experience in each Essential Stepfamily Theme may be summarized as follows:

1. Differing Ideals of Family
Couple Centered vs. Child Centered
2. Conflicting Patterns in Stepfamily Form
Insiders vs. Outsiders
3. Competition for Relationship Primacy
Intimacy vs. Emotional Distance
4. Power Struggles Over Parenting Rights
Powerless vs. Empowered
5. Fear of Loss of Identity
To be a part of? or To be apart from?

These themes and polarities are used as points of reference in the General Discussion, Chapter 5.

Summary

The experience of both men and women described here is that which occurs after the stepfamily has stabilized over several years. Structural themes are durable in that they persist after the concerted efforts described by each of the co-researchers to "work out" differences between men and women in a stepfamily. These are discussed with reference to related stepfamily and existential literature in the following chapter.

CHAPTER FIVE
GENERAL DISCUSSION

Introduction

In this chapter, the findings of the present study are presented and discussed with reference to relevant family, stepfamily, and existential literature. The possible applications of these findings to clinical interventions with stepfamilies, their implications for further research, and limitations of this study are also discussed.

A salient feature of men's and women's descriptions of stepfamily experiences is difficulty in making the transition to living in a stepfamily. Essential themes common to men and women have been characterized by oppositional descriptors: differing ideals, conflicting family patterns, competition for relationship primacy, power struggles, and fear of loss of identity. Men experience ambivalence, self doubt, confusion, alienation, frustration with their partner's resistance to change, feelings of powerlessness, resentment of a woman's bond with her children, and fear of engulfment by the stepfamily. Women experience disillusionment, disappointment, decreased emotional closeness with male partners, feelings of possessiveness and defensiveness, and fear of losing autonomy and identity as head of the family. The only "non-negative" descriptor is in women's shared experience of increased emotional closeness with their children. However, this occurs as somewhat of a trade-off in women's emotional closeness with a male partner.

Taken at a literal level, these results may appear to be simply another affirmation of a negative stepfamily stereotype. However, in the context of family, stepfamily, and existential literature, such an evaluation is obviously simplistic. Family theory and clinical literature reviewed in Chapter 2 outlines transitional processes involved in stepfamily formation. Men's and women's descriptions of lived experience in a stepfamily sketch these processes as they occur, or as the need for developmental change presents itself. The potential contribution of the analysis of these descriptions is the "bringing to life" (Rakoff, 1988) of theoretical considerations in the context of men's and women's experiences.

The structures revealed in analysis of stepfamily experiences are "snapshots" capturing stepfamily development at a particular moment. Both theoretical and clinical literature on stepfamilies indicates that stepfamily formation requires development over time (Ahrons & Rodgers, 1987; McGoldrick & Carter, 1988). This development includes transformation of "traditional" ideas about family and restructuring of existing family relationships. Initiating and accepting changes in these attitudes and structures appears necessary to stepfamily formation. Men and women forming stepfamilies face the additional challenge of creating a "new" family form in place of what they and society value and hold as familiar. A thorough examination of descriptions of stepfamily experiences reveals how both men

and women are involved in an ongoing and individual developmental process in the context of the stepfamily. The following discussion of men's and women's experiences of a stepfamily centers on this process.

Existential or "Genuine" Learning in a Stepfamily

Existential literature offers a point of reference for "making sense" of experience lived without the benefit of norm based referents. Living in a stepfamily requires what Colaizzi (1978) calls "genuine learning", defined here by its existential characteristics.

Genuine learning reaches the core of our lives and existence. It is difficult and doesn't follow from our past automatically or easily. Genuine learning is individually as well as situationally contingent, not following pre-determined predictability. It is physiognomic. It radically re-structures our world-views of something. Genuine learning is never completely achieved because our living of something is never absolute or totally finished. It is a temporal folding which can never be absolutely completed. It involves the risk of loosening ties with the old world in order to encounter the new. It is patient and is able to wait and hope. Genuine learning unfolds temporally and is irreducible to the sum of its components. Genuine learning is surprising in both the fact that we have learned and in what we have learned.

These existential characteristics of "genuine" learning fit well with the kind of learning required in stepfamily formation, for which there is no "ready made meaning" (Kantor & Leher, 1975).

Osborne (1985) develops this concept of personal learning as a change in world-view.

A destructuring or loosening is usually necessary before such a restructuring (change in world-view) can occur. The most common way in which the inertia of our existing world-view becomes loosened is by some major change in our lives (e.g. marital dissolution). The resulting disappointment, while painful, creates the possibility for a shift in world-view. Perls (1951) points out that a shift in world-view involves a re-evaluation rather than a devaluation of our lived-experience (p. 203).

The pervasive negative affect in protocols is a "devaluation of the lived-experience" of a stepfamily and reflects the need for "genuine learning" and a subsequent change in world-view as suggested by Osborne (1985). Learning to live in stepfamilies may be seen as a developmental process that reintegrates personal meaning affirmed through home and family (Kantor & Leher, 1975) into new forms within the stepfamily. The "inertia" referred to above is seen as a function of identity. That is, the meaning of a person's life as affirmed through his/her participation in the world, in this case in the context of the stepfamily. The following

discussion explores the overarching process of resolving identity in the stepfamily through existential or "genuine learning.

Existential-phenomenology views a person as existing co-constitutionally with his/her world. Our experience is both construed by us as subject and mirrored as the consciousness of something (Osborne, 1990). Our consciousness may be some physical thing out in our world (transcendent objects) or psychologically within us, such as memory or fantasy (immanent objects). Here, transcendent objects refer to the physical aspects of stepfamily experience- significant people in the family system, or the physical furnishings of a person's life-world. Immanent objects refer to the existence of psychological factors impacting a person's experience of a stepfamily, such as memories of former family experience or fantasies of the ideal of home and family. The meaning of a man's or woman's experience of a phenomenon rests both on a situated experience of, for example, a person or event in the stepfamily, and memories or fantasies each man or woman brings to that experience.

"Meaning resides not solely in the situation nor solely in the individual, but as a transaction between the two so that the individual both constitutes and is constituted by the situations" (Benner, 1985, p.7)

As men and women co-constitute their experience of the stepfamily the meaning of their experience is shaped by both physical and psychological "objects". Meaning emerges from a

person's interactions with others. The experience of co-researchers may or may not correspond with our objective understanding of objects or actions, but they are none the less the man's or woman's experiences. For example, Penny experiences her partner sleeping to avoid conflict as an "aggressive" act. Doug compares his present experience in his stepfamily home with his recollection of the "tranquility" in his childhood home and fantasizes about a future "coming home" to his remembered experience.

Our identity is affirmed through the meaning we find in the lived experience of our life-world (Tillich, 1952). In the case of lived experience in a stepfamily, meaning may also be shaped by the metaphoric "baggage" men or women bring with them. McGoldrick and Carter (1988) suggest that in remarriage there are at least three sets of baggage; from the families of origin, from the first marriage, and from the process of separation, divorce, and the period between marriages. (p. 405). Such "baggage" may be physical or psychological in its form.

The identity of men and women living in a stepfamily is centered on how they as individuals participate in the phenomenon of a stepfamily as a whole. While the "question of identity" is presented as an essential theme in the experience of both genders, how men or women participate in all aspects of the stepfamily affirms them or denies their human being. Thus, how people experience their own identity in relation to their self and in relation to the stepfamily

as a whole. The resolution of identity presents itself as an overarching consideration in the way men and women experience other essential themes in stepfamily participation.

The Stepfamily as an "Incomplete Institution"

The importance of normative processes in family formation is documented in Parts 1 and 2 of the Literature Review in Chapter 2. The traditional nuclear family is based on socially prescribed gender roles and develops on a model that has a relatively consistent cultural and experiential base. The literature characterizes the stepfamily as a recent social phenomenon, inherently ambiguous in its form, an incomplete institution. Divorced family literature indicates that the processes of dealing with stressful transitions of family reorganization in separation, divorce, and single parent households are necessary for the psychological well being of family members. Making these adjustments is necessary but not sufficient to make a "successful " transition to a "new" family form, the stepfamily.

McGoldrick and Carter (1988) suggest a new family model for remarriage, characterized by permeable boundaries permitting children to come and go easily in visitation and custody arrangements, acceptance of the parental responsibilities and feelings of one's spouse without carrying out such responsibilities for the spouse or trying to compete with the parent child attachment or combat the necessary contact with the ex-

spouse, and revision of traditional gender roles. The analysis of lived experience in this study identifies the three themes in stepfamily development cited here from McGoldrick and Carter (1988), as well as issues arising from differing ideals of a stepfamily and from identity struggles. Each of these issues is discussed below in the context of relevant literature.

Stress and Crisis in Stepfamily Formation

Transition in family form is presented throughout the literature as a stress with the potential to create crisis. Garfield, (1982) articulates the stress experienced by men and women in the processes of family transition.

Perhaps the most painful aspect of marital separation is the rupture of attachment bonds that exist between spouses. These bonds serve as the emotional glue of the marriage. Weiss (1979) likens them to the intense emotional ties that develop between mother and child...which carry their fantasized wishes for exclusive and unlimited emotional physical access to the other. When these bonds are undone, spouses often feel overtaken by a terrible sense of loneliness, a sense that they are no longer at home or secure in their world. (Garfield, 1982, p. 5)

While men and women may have resolved the losses experienced through divorce, the potential for reactivation of "crisis" in adjusting to a stepfamily remains (McGoldrick & Carter, 1988). Crisis derives from the Greek *krinein* which

means to separate or purify. Bollnow (1961) relates crisis with new beginnings. He describes crisis as characterizing certain processes of life, both individual and communal life, which by their "pointed, grave, and risky character, stand out from the steady current of the rest of life" (Bollnow, p.1). Crisis does not necessarily lead to catastrophe. Overcoming crisis means not only dealing with a perceived threat but at the same time, viewed more deeply, passing through a crisis represents purification, an elimination of long active conflicts. Passing through the crisis may be the only way of arrival at a new level. James' describes his arrival at a new understanding of himself in re-evaluating his painful process in the crisis precipitated by his divorce.

When there was the prospect of the split I was very frightened, but I feel that, sort of metaphorically, my former wife stomped on my fingers and made me let go. You know, I went over the cliff and I found that I didn't splat into pieces at the bottom, but I survived, and I was a bit bruised and my pride was dented quite a bit, but I got over it and in fact she probably did a damn good thing.

Crisis signifies a real process which plays itself out in the events of life (Bollnow, 1961). When we participate in a situation played out in this way, we say it is *critical*. A critical attitude is one which does not take reality as self-evident, but rather examines it as to its justification.

Assuming a critical attitude, when its purpose is to disclose error or devalue, is an aggressive act. This aggressive attitude is evident in Doug's experience of sharing time and space with his stepsons.

In this household...with these two little guys moving around...is like living in a hotel. (I) never feel at home, never comfortable because there are these bodies moving around in the rooms that make you feel like you still have company. When they leave, you know that feeling when you've had company and they stay too long, and you sort of sit down on your chesterfield and say 'Oh, God, I'm glad they're gone'. Like when they go to their dad's.

Doug's critical attitude illustrated here is an aggressive one. His attitude devalues the essence, presence and action of others, in this case his stepchildren. Doug's critical stance transforms his experience of their shared time, space, and relationship. His bodily experience is "glad" when the object of his critical attitude is no longer present. As "company", the children are transient, they do not dwell in this home. "Company", usually associated with companionship, here represents dis-ease; "you can never feel comfortable" because "you feel like you still have company". Shared time becomes a burden, "when they've stayed too long". The essence of this dwelling place called home is de-valued when it is shared. It feels like a hotel. The essential

humanness of children is denied. they become "bodies moving around in the rooms".

Family Boundaries, Participation and Identity

Literature on stepfamily formation refers to the necessity of a loosening of boundaries in the uniting of former nuclear family components (Ahrons & Rodgers, 1987; McGoldrick & Carter, 1988). In family systems theory, Minuchin (1974) conceptualizes boundaries as the rules in a family for who participates and how. He presents boundary clarity on a continuum varying between the extremes of very rigid (disengaged) to very diffuse (enmeshed). Enmeshment requires surrendering of autonomy, while disengagement creates a lack of loyalty, belonging and interdependence. These transactional styles indicate a preference for the type of interaction going on in a family.

McGoldrick and Carter (1988) identify potential boundary difficulties in terms of membership (Who are the "real" members of the family?), space (What space is mine? Where do I really belong?), authority (Who is really in charge and of what areas of family life?), and time (Who gets how much of my time and how much do I get of theirs?).

Men's experience in a stepfamily is a dilemma posed by the choice of "moving in or moving out". A man's "baggage" is his experience of both independence and loneliness following divorce. He knows he can survive independently but chooses to be a part of a stepfamily and attempts to move from a disengaged position as an "outsider" to more intimate

engagement with a woman in the context of her former nuclear family. Men experience resistance in this movement, both within themselves and within the stepfamily structure. Subsequently, they feel conflicted within themselves and rejected by a woman and her children.

Women who have children experience living with a man as a dilemma of choosing to become more or less emotionally engaged with a man or with her children. This choice presents itself as a trade-off. Women base their choice on identification with their children, experiencing increased emotional closeness with them, and decreased emotional closeness with a man.

In existential literature, Tillich (1952) discusses participation as "being part of something from which one is, at the same time separated". He describes three different ways in which we can participate by literally "taking part". The first is in the sense of "sharing" as in sharing the physical space of a home. Or participation may be used in the sense of "having in common", as in the shared history of a woman and her children. Finally, participation may refer to "being a part", for instance, in the way men and women are a part of the new whole they create in a stepfamily.

Tillich (1952) further discusses the relationship of parts to the whole. "A part of a whole is not identical with the whole to which it belongs. But the whole is what it is only with the part" (p. 125). A man's struggle in a stepfamily is to participate as a part of something which,

although not whole, has a sense of unity from another time, the structure of a woman's former nuclear family. Women identify strongly with this part. They struggle for the courage to risk the affirmation of participating with part of the former nuclear family and yet join the new form of a stepfamily.

An example of this struggle is men's experience of feeling "powerless" as stepparents, not because they lack power as individuals, but because of how they participate. Doug's nostalgia for his biological children affects how he interacts with his stepsons. He is "powerless" as a stepparent, not because of his wife's sanctions, but because his participation is not "heartfelt". His participation requires the courage (*coeur* = heart) to become part of a family with which he has a brief shared history and not biological connection.

Penny's identification with her children is a product of a shared emotional history. Her participation with them is as an extension of herself. She describes a "cord" conducting emotion directly from her children to herself. How she reports participation with her partner in the stepfamily also reflects her emotional identification with her children, possibly at an unconscious level. Penny makes semantic shifts in the person of pronouns with the antecedent nouns clearly identifying her children, thus inferring their experience as hers. One of several examples is her statement that, "the children soon disliked him because we felt he didn't have

the right to come into our house...." The existential learning implicated here is a loosening of Penny's family ties identified with her children in order to permit participation of her male partner in the stepfamily.

The Ideals of Home and Family

All men and women in this study attempt to realize their ideal of "home" in the context of a stepfamily. While ideals differ for each gender, the desire to feel "at home" is shared by all. Parsons and Bales (1955) describe the evolving perception of family function from meeting physical needs to meeting emotional needs. Both men and women in this investigation focussed their descriptions on the importance of having their emotional needs met in the stepfamily.

The human need for home and family is described by Rakoff (1988) as "epigenetic". That is, a phenomenon he considers as essential and universal to human-being as the development of language. Attempting to realize the ideal of home is a prominent feature of men's and women's experiences in this study, as it represents a common motive for stepfamily formation. Home is the place that reminds men and women of "family", whether of their family of origin or of their family prior to divorce. "Home" as the physical and social context of the stepfamily, has the exterior or physical elements of family members and meaningful objects. Home also has an interior or psychological quality of fantasies or ideals which shape the meaning of its experience.

Gaston Bachelard (1969) uses "the nest" in a metaphoric description of the deeply felt human need for home.

A nest....is a precarious thing, and yet it sets us to daydreaming of security....And so when we examine a nest, we place ourselves at the origin of confidence in the world, we receive a beginning confidence, an urge toward cosmic confidence. Would a bird build its nest if it did not have its instinct for confidence in the world?....The nest know(s) confidence in the world....The nest....knows nothing of the hostility of the world (p.102).

If we accept Bachelard's image of security in the nest we can, for the sake of this discussion, place ourselves at the "origin of confidence" and enter into the "daydream of security" associated with the creation of "home".

"Home" and "family" are broadly defined in family literature as a place where family members' emotional and material needs are met (Parson & Bales, 1955; Rakoff, 1988). Creative action is necessary to satisfy our deeply felt human need for home. Kantor and Leher (1975) assert that we find a meaningful world in "family" or in this case home as an extension of family. They suggest that here a personally meaningful world is created through "face to face" conversations. In describing her experience of the stepfamily, Diana realizes her individual responsibility in this process.

"I have to be very clear on what I think is home, what I know is home and how home feels, before I can begin to transmit that to the people around me. It's me defining what a home is and living that."

Creation of a home calls for a shared ideal and a creative process of realizing "what home is" through "face to face conversations" (Kantor & Leher, 1975). Diana's quest for autonomy as an individual preempts the opportunity to converse with her partner in a way permitting creation of a home based on a shared concept.

Traditional Gender Roles in the Stepfamily

In Chapter 2, a review of gender roles in family functioning indicates that women's roles have traditionally been associated with "homemaking" and emotional nurturing while men's roles have been associated with "bread winning" through material provision for the family by working outside the home. McGoldrick and Carter's (1988) "new form" for the stepfamily suggests an examination of how traditional male and female roles are implemented in meeting stepfamily family needs.

Men in this study described their contributions to "homemaking" in terms of traditional male instrumental functions. James is angered by his partner devaluing his contribution of "sweat equity" to their home. He feels devalued when she does not acknowledge him "breaking his back" at yard work and carpentry as being as important as a "whole lot of other interpersonal things". Doug feels

excluded from involvement in executive decisions about renovations in home owned by his wife. He attributes his lack "interest in his environment" to not having a part in home ownership.

Penny describes her experience of sharing tasks, power, and affect in her stepfamily:

He liked to make all the meals and set the rules and be boss of the house. He was hard to please and ended up doing all the housework. He did the laundry and the cooking but he didn't do what I wanted most, and that was to have a relationship with my kids.

Penny resents not only how her partner participates in the stepfamily, but also devalues his contribution to homemaking. His physical support in sharing instrumental tasks does not satisfy her ideal of the expressive function of a stepfamily. Penny's perception of an empowered partner is of one who functions affectively rather than instrumentally within the stepfamily.

Penny's description suggests that learning to share power and affect within the stepfamily home may be necessary in order to realize McGoldrick and Carter's (1988) model for remarried families. Pleck (1983) reported that the extent to which men are supportive in household tasks is limited by a woman's willingness to share power within the household. It is also worth considering that, based on traditional gender roles, men have limited first hand and cultural practice at

nurturing. They have grown up with a cultural imperative to perform instrumental tasks. Women have limited first hand and cultural practice at having men nurture along side them. Women have grown up with a cultural and possibly a biological imperative to nurture and "protect" their children (Rakoff, 1988).

Men's and women's descriptions of home are in some ways synonymous with family. In descriptions of the experience of their ideal home they reveal dimensions of the personal meanings of home. The situated reality of men's and women's experience of home is varied, but consistently falls short of their ideals. The following annotated discussion explores the tension between the ideal and the reality of "home" for men and women living in a stepfamily.

Tillich (1952) discusses the relationship of parts to the whole. "A part of a whole is not identical with the whole to which it belongs. But the whole is what it is only with the part" (p. 125). An example from co-researcher's descriptions is Penny's intense identification with her children as a unified "part" of a stepfamily which precludes her participation and identification with the whole.

Feeling "At Home" in a Stepfamily

In a quantitative study of stepfamilies, Mills (1984) develops an arithmetic formulation of how long the achievement of feeling "at home" "should" take, based on an assessment of stepparent - stepchild relationships. Findings of the present study reveal the qualitative aspects of

feeling "at home" in a stepfamily. In their descriptions of their ideals, the men and women reveal dimensions of their personal meanings attached to home and family. The situated reality of men's and women's experience of home is varied, but consistently falls short of their ideals. The following discussion explores the tension between the ideal and the reality of home and family for men and women living in a stepfamily.

Home is a bodily felt experience. Doug describes his ideal of home as a bodily felt remembrance of tranquility not present in the reality of his stepfamily home.

"Talk about a level of tranquility. I guess that's the part of my past I want to get to. I want to be able to drive up the drive-way, and if I've had a shitty day, just to feel I'm home. When I come into the stepfamily environment, any disruption is uncomfortable."

The ideal of home is situated in time. Each of the men and women in this investigation describe their ideal of home in terms of nostalgic referents. In the preceding excerpt, Doug describes his ideal of home as a remembered experience of his childhood home.

Elsewhere, Doug refers in a nostalgic way to the family home shared in his first marriage. Doug describes the reality of his stepfamily home from an emotional state of grief for what has been lost. His grief is partly for the loss of his childhood experience of home, and partly for the loss of his

former family through divorce. In the present, he seeks unsuccessfully to recapture his lost but remembered physical and emotional sense of "home". His immediate experience of home is dissatisfaction and frustration, trying to recapture or create in the present the experience of home as "a part of my past I want to get to".

Ideally, home has a "special feeling". Each person interviewed described an individual special feeling of home, sadly, in terms of its absence. In Penny's preceding description, home is a place where ideally, her family would become whole through a relationship between her partner and her children. Diana describes the development of her stepfamily as:

"Our first year together was hell....Year two stabilized a bit; settling in, developing a routine, getting the house in order. But we never got to feel like a settled, well ordered family."

In her entire stepfamily history, the ineffable special feeling of being a "settled, well ordered family", eludes her. James idealizes a sense of familiarity and predictability in furnishings and patterns of events contributing to feeling at home. What he experiences in the stepfamily is the alien (gremlins) and chaotic unpredictability. For Doug, the special feeling of home is being "Lord and Master", or in the language from the time of childhood from which he draws his ideal of home, "a spoiled brat", pursuing his activities without disruption.

Home as a place of shared space experienced differently by men and their stepchildren than by women and their children. Men experience their stepchildren as intrusions upon their personal space. For James, they are "gremlins" "running out of control". In his stepfamily, the metaphoric malicious but supposedly invisible beings have materialized and he feels powerless to control them. Doug experiences his stepchildren as "guests who have stayed too long". "Any disruption" in his shared space is "uncomfortable".

Women make no mention of their children's activities as disruptive. Diana experiences her stepchildren as "guests" in a positive context. Sharing space is a problem for women only when their male partners have a dampening effect on activities. Penny resents her partner as "a watcher" and "a spoiler" of her "playful" and "spontaneous" activities with her children.

In conclusion, home is a place of particularized personal meaning. In a stepfamily, we see attempts to realize individual meanings that are lived differently by men and women. A man's home is his "castle". He wants to belong with a woman and be valued for his instrumental contributions. He wants undisturbed space and a sense of familiarity. A woman's home is a "nest", a place for the traditional expressive activities of child rearing, made whole by a man's emotional relationship with both her and her children, and a feeling of being "settled and well ordered".

The struggle for affirmation as participants in the stepfamily is essentially different for men and women. Men are outsiders, powerless as parents, They know they have the courage" to leave, but the real struggle is to participate in the part of something which is not whole, the structure of a woman's former nuclear family. Women identify strongly with this part and their struggle is to have the courage to risk the affirmation of participating with the part to join the whole of a new family form.

Contributions of this investigation to existing stepfamily research

A general goal of phenomenological research is the understanding of human experience in context. As well, phenomenological analysis has the potential to reveal an "inside perspective" of the phenomenon under investigation (Frankel, 1985). As a phenomenological investigation, the present study is not an attempt to prove or disprove any hypothesis or theory. However, its findings may confirm or conflict with existing research, or may offer unique perspectives of a stepfamily. Contributions of this investigation are evaluated in the context of salient issues in existing stepfamily research as outlined below.

Conflict and stress.

Numerous authors (Ahrons & Rodgers, 1987, Bowerman & Irish, 1962, Duberman 1975) identify stress associated with stepfamily formation. In the present study, co-researcher's

describe the presence of stress in their attempts to make the transition to a stepfamily . Accounts of both men and women relate conflicting ideals for the stepfamily, power struggles over parenting and competition for relationship primacy as stressors at the interpersonal level. Conflict experienced as fearing loss of identity in stepfamily participation was identified by both genders. To the best of my knowledge, the intrapersonal nature of identity conflict has not been examined elsewhere in stepfamily literature.

Family satisfaction.

Reported satisfaction with family life is widely accepted as an indicator of successful family functioning. White and Booth (1985) found stepfamilies reported significantly less satisfaction with family life than parents in first marriages. Adults in stepfamilies indicated the presence of stepchildren as a destabilizing influence. Child rearing and discipline have been ranked as the most difficult areas of stepfamily life (Duberman, 1975; Maddox, 1975; Messinger, 1976; Visher & Visher, 1979). In this study, co-researchers consistently described couple conflict related to parenting and stepparenting. Men living with a woman who has children felt disempowered as stepparents. Women in this situation experienced resentment at men's "intrusion", distanced themselves from their partners and developed a protective stance in relation with their children. These reports uniquely describe the way in which couple conflict over children develops and is played out in a stepfamily.

Complexity and difficulty in relationships.

A survey of existing stepfamily research indicates that complexity and difficulty in development of stepfamily relationships is a common theme (Nelson & Levant, 1991). Reports by co-researchers in the present study concur. Intrapersonal conflicts compounded the complexity and difficulty of developing stepfamily relationships. These conflicts included themes of nostalgia for former and idealized families, and fearing loss of identity in stepfamily participation. As well, co-researchers reported experiencing unfamiliarity with new roles and interpersonal relationships related to stepfamily formation, and conflict in competition for membership, sharing ideals, roles and power. These descriptions are unique in that they articulate the complexity and difficulty of forming stepfamily relationships from an insider's perspective.

"The myth of instant love".

The "Myth of Instant Love", described earlier, is commonly referred to in stepfamily literature (Nelson & Levant, 1991; Visher & Visher, 1979). This "myth" is evident in the present study and reported with some variation. Women describe rapport in relationships with their stepchildren. This positive affect may be related to casual contact, but shows none of the disaffection generally reported. Men's reports present variations on the "Myth of Instant Love". Doug rejects it *a priori*, describing blocked affect attributed to feelings of loyalty to his biological children.

His feelings of divided loyalty are in keeping with the findings of (Keith, 1978). James' report of disappointment in the lack of reciprocity in affective exchanges with his stepchildren indicate that men, too, may experience disappointment when their attempts at emotional closeness with stepchildren are rebuffed.

Men's struggle for inclusion.

The issue of men's struggle for inclusion in stepfamilies is a common theme in stepfamily literature (Nelson & Levant, 1991). In this study, co-researchers consistently reported dynamics related to competition between men and their stepchildren for relationship primacy with a woman. "Scapegoating" and women's paradoxical response to men's attempts for primacy provide an insider's perspective unique to an investigation of lived experience.

Boundary issues.

Boundary issues are identified in the literature as a persistent stepfamily concern. Theorists taking a systems approach consider both sub-system boundaries and those with former nuclear families critical (Ahrons & Rodgers, 1987). In this investigation, critical boundary issues are described by co-researchers as arising predominantly within the stepfamily subsystems. This is particularly so in the struggle between men and stepchildren for relationship primacy with a woman. Whether boundary issues as identified in this study are common among stepfamilies generally may warrant further investigation.

Time for stepfamily stabilization.

Existing research indicates the time required for family members adjustment to "stabilizing" in a stepfamily varying from 2-3 years (Hetherington, 1989) to "one half the children's lifetime" (Mills, 1984). Clinical findings (Carter & McGoldrick, 1988) address necessary processes in stages of family reorganization preceding stepfamily formation for functional interactions to occur in a stepfamily. "Quality" of functioning during shared time in developing stepfamily relationships is a variable described by co-researchers in this study, but previously given little attention. To my knowledge, quality of time is an aspect of stepfamily development which has not been considered in other studies.

The intention of this study was explication of men's and women's experience of living in a stepfamily in which children from women's former marriage are present. As well, essential features of a stepfamily are identified in a comparison of themes between genders. What results are the essential features of men's and women's experience of a stepfamily, and a profile of essential features of a stepfamily. These results, as presented at the conclusion of Chapter 4, are the substantive findings of this investigation. They contribute a perspective which is hopefully useful in understanding the experience of living in a stepfamily, and if so, a unique and worthwhile contribution to a much needed body of literature.

Implications of this Investigation for Psycho-educational
Programs and Therapeutic Interventions With Stepfamilies

The current study provides several suggestions for therapy with stepfamilies in need of intervention, and for psycho-educational programs with men and women in stepfamilies with proactive intentions. A general goal in stepfamily formation is the transformation of residual nuclear families into a new stepfamily form. This process of transformation has three distinct phases, taking members of the intact nuclear family through separation and divorce, to single parent households, to stepfamily formation. Each phase embodies a number of developmental issues (McGoldrick & Carter, 1988). The results of this investigation are offered here in the context of a developmental learning model.

In the present study, the five essential themes identified in stepfamily structure represent aspects of men's and women's differing experiences of a stepfamily. These themes have been characterized by oppositional descriptors indicating the potential for conflict in each or any of the thematic areas. Assessing themes in the presenting problem of a stepfamily may provide cues enabling a therapist to induce movement in a truncated developmental process which is preventing resolution of issues and blocking successful stepfamily functioning.

Assessing compatibility in men's and women's ideals for the stepfamily may provide an indication of a developmental direction in helping a couple arrive at a common

understanding of what it is they want to create in their stepfamily. To what extent do men idealize the stepfamily as a context for developing a relationship with a woman? To what extent does a woman idealize the stepfamily as a context for child rearing? To what extent are these ideals being shared, and how can the couple come to experience a more satisfactory shared ideal for their stepfamily?

Assessing the extent of inclusion or exclusion of stepfamily members may also indicate a direction for a couple's learning or development. Men in this study described their stepfamily experience as feeling like "outsiders" to the structure of a woman's former nuclear family. Women experienced men's attempts at inclusion as "intrusion".

Similarly, competition between men and their stepchildren for relationship primacy with a woman resulted in men experiencing fear of their diminished importance through stepfamily participation. Men responded by increasing their assertiveness in efforts to establish their presence in the stepfamily. Paradoxically, women responded to men's initiatives for relationship primacy by withdrawing emotionally from their male partners and establishing stronger emotional bonds with their children. Both male and female coresearchers reported triangulation within the stepfamily resulting from collusion between a woman and her children with the stepfather as a "scapegoat" for stepfamily conflict.

In this study, power struggles between men and women centered on the "right to parent" were identified as an essential theme. Men reported feeling "powerless" as stepparents, either because they felt distant from their stepchildren, or because of a woman's intervention in stepparent - stepchild interactions. Women resented men's authoritative approaches with children as an intrusion upon rights as heads of "their" families. Learning to share parenting responsibility, negotiating realms of parental jurisdiction, and fostering the development of stepparent - stepchild relationships appear to be the developmental tasks for stepfamilies with issues centered on power struggles over parenting.

Men and women reported fearing a loss of identity in stepfamily formation; men through engulfment by the stepfamily, women through loss of autonomy as heads of single parent households. The theme of fearing loss of identity is embedded in and overarches other themes in stepfamily formation. An existential approach couched in terms of men's and women's identity in the context of the stepfamily may assist in the prevention or resolution of problems arising from this prominent stepfamily theme.

Implicit in the descriptions of men's and women's experience of a stepfamily is both an intra-personal and an interpersonal conflict over "what is" vs "what should be". A full hearing of what men and women experience in a stepfamily

as well as what they idealize happening may provide starting points in stepfamily therapy.

The phenomenological analysis of stepfamily experience and subsequent narrative description of lived experience in a stepfamily provides both therapists and clients with information about the etiology, nature and intensity of stepfamily conflicts. A problem shared by therapists and stepfamilies seeking counselling is the "incomplete institutionalization" or "normalization" of stepfamily formation. In need of therapeutic intervention face is a lack of normalized expectations. The problems they face are "only happening to them" (Dudley, 1991). There is a didactic function to therapy which has as its goal the normalization of experience through teaching. The "inside perspective" of this study provides a graphic description of the experiences of men and women in stepfamily formation and may be useful in providing permission for men and women to accept their experience as "normal". Such acceptance is seen as moving a person's experience beyond denial to a point where behavioral or attitudinal change may more easily be accomplished.

Implications for Further Research

There is an experience of anger reported explicitly in descriptions of all coresearchers. It is beyond the scope of this investigation to assess the intensity of this anger or the frequency of its expression. However, themes of differing ideals, feelings of exclusion and threats of the mother -

child bond, power struggles, and fear of loss of identity, suggest that the experience of anger over stepfamily issues has potential for extreme intensity. Co-researcher's reports indicate that expression of anger over stepfamily issues is frequent.

Ahrons and Rodgers (1987) suggest that men and women entering stepfamilies may establish patterns of "pseudomutuality" in relation to stepfamily issues. Their suggestion is supported by empirical evidence and by a rationale suggesting that anger associated with the trauma of divorce prevents the necessary expression of frustration over stepfamily issues. They further suggest that avoiding expression of angry feelings actually impedes stepfamily formation by preventing the "hammering out" a new family form. Further investigation comparing the intensity and expression of anger in intact nuclear families with that in stepfamilies may be useful in determining its impact on the resolution of family issues.

Support for further phenomenological stepfamily research appears in the literature. Frankel (1985) presents the phenomenological method as a viable method for the exploration of complex co-constituted phenomena. Jenni (1990) suggests that multiple perspectives are useful in understanding complex phenomena which occur in various ways and change over time. Further investigations of men's and women's lived experience of a stepfamily may serve to confirm or disconfirm the findings of this study. Broadening the base

of co-researcher's to include children's perspectives of living in a stepfamily would add an important dimension to the outcomes of this analysis. As well, investigating the lived experience of custodial fathers who live with a woman, and of women who live with a man who has custody of his children would complement the asymmetry of the coresearchers selected for this study.

Limitations of this Investigation

The purpose of this study was to develop an understanding of how men experience living with a woman who has children, and how women with children experience living with a man. This was achieved through a phenomenological analysis of descriptions of men's and women's perspectives of stepfamily life. The focus of the investigation was limited to data based on first person reports. It was not the purpose of this investigation to support or negate any existing theory, although outcomes are discussed in the context of theoretical constructs. This investigation was not intended to test any hypothesis, although it is hoped that it will generate interest in research which may be generated from descriptions and tested by a suitable means. It was not the intention of this study to determine whether the co-researcher's perceptions were "real" or "unreal". Nor was the study intended to explicitly study the effects of men's or women's experience on other family members.

The findings of this investigations are limited in that they are based on the analysis of descriptions of a "snapshot" experience of men's and women's experience of a stepfamily. The processes involved in stepfamily formation are described in the literature as having a developmental nature not specifically traced in this account. The descriptions analyzed here are incomplete just as any description of a lived experience of a phenomenon such as the stepfamily is only a partial revelation of the complex human subject as a co-constituent. Investigation of how men and women experience a stepfamily is also incomplete in that "genuine learning is incomplete" (Colaizzi, 1979). As well, the nature of the experience of co-researchers reported here does not purport to represent the experience of men and women beyond the scope of this study, particularly those whose family configuration differs from that of men who live with a woman who has children and women who have children and live with a man.

Dahl (1987) offers men and women involved in stepfamily formation the following advice based on research with nonclinical remarried families:

Go slow. Take time. Settle your old marriage before starting a new one. Accept the need for continual involvement of parts of the old family with the new. Help children maintain relationships with their biological parents. Stepparents should try for mutual courtesy, but not expect a stepchild's love. They should

respect the special bond between the biological parent and child. Communicate, negotiate, compromise, and accept what cannot be changed.

Conclusion

The recent phenomenon of the stepfamily occurs in a social context which has evolved along with changing maternal and paternal roles, and expectations of home and family. While the traditional nuclear family has been transformed, human needs for family remain much the same (Rakoff, 1988). How men, women, and children can meet these needs continues to be explored.

Theoretical literature on divorced and remarried families focuses on the formation of an unweildy social system. The complexity of this system propels a search for meaningful descriptive terms. Ahrons and Rodgers (1981) concept of the "binuclear" family in divorced family theory is regarded as a break through. The developmental processes outlined by McGoldrick and Carter (1988) represent a pioneering effort.

Clinical literature dealing with divorce and stepfamily formation focuses on a plethora of individual emotional and interpersonal problems involved in associated processes . Each family member is affected by a number of profound changes. The magnitude of adjustment required by all family members in this process is perhaps best summed up by McGoldrick and Carter's (1988) assertion that the disruptions

of divorce and family reorganization add another complete "phase" to the life cycle of a family.

Most stepfamily studies have been done from the perspective of natural science research. The complexity of the stepfamily form presents difficulty in conducting a meaningful investigation. Research on the post-divorce family structure does not present a unified statement. That is, when specific variables are isolated and investigated, results are often equivocal (Jenni, 1990). The phenomenological approach of this investigation presents a wholistic perspective of men's and women's lived experience of a stepfamily, and a profile of essential features of the stepfamily phenomenon.

Traditional research to date has investigated the stepfamily from the perspective of an outside observer. The utility of phenomenological methodology is presented as a viable method for the investigation of multiple perspectives of complex social systems, such as the stepfamily (Frankel, 1985). This study describes the stepfamily system from an inside perspective. Adding the inside perspective of a phenomenological analysis to what we know of the stepfamily holds the promise of complementing existing findings of natural science approaches.

It is my sincere desire that any understanding facilitated by this investigation may be helpful to persons directly involved in the processes of change associated with stepfamily formation, or to those working in a supportive role with such individuals or families.

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APPENDIX A

VERBATIM TRANSCRIPTIONS OF

INTERVIEWS #1 AND #2

WITH "DIANA"

Project Name: Men's And Women's Lived Experience of
Stepfamilies Date: 9/18/90

*** Interview # 1 DIANA Question # 17 card id 13159
Field: data ***

What I'm doing is a qualitative study looking at the lived experience of men and women in stepfamilies. I want to interview some women who have shared parenting in stepfamilies to get at what it's like to live in that situation.

So you really want to know what I've gone through as a woman?

Yeah. Speaking from your own experience, whether that's what you've thought or felt. So I would like to let you do most of the talking, and if I can do some follow up or maybe open up some new avenues for discussion.

So maybe I should just start by saying that Adam and I have been together for nine years, and I have three children and he has two. Most of the co-parenting has happened with mine, but occasionally we've had his children here from England, so there has been some limited experience of the two of us trying to be with his children.

So usually there are just three kids. Usually there are three, and- now that's when we stated out nine years ago. My oldest is now married and off on his own. My second son has sort of moved in and out, he's been in a revolving door, being independent and then coming home for a while and then going again. But he's currently at home, and he's twenty, and then my daughter is fifteen, and has been home until recently, we've got her in another situation. There's some stress there right now. I don't want to sound pessimistic, and yet my real view of all this stuff is that step parenting is incredibly complicated, and if I knew what I know now, back nine years ago I would never have gotten into a step parent situation in a blended family. And I would not have allowed it to occur the way it did. So, it feels kind of touchy and vulnerable talking about it, because I just feel like I wish I had known more back then. The biggest thing I'm aware of is that there really weren't any ceremonies and there wasn't enough transition time for him to come into the relationship. He was lonely and wanted to live together very quickly, and I kind of allowed myself to be washed away. It was romantic, and I was feeling overloaded, so it was nice to think of sharing the parenting. My hunch is that he wanted a family even more than he wanted me, and I think that that created some weakness in our structure. His need for a family and children, you know a family unit, was very obvious from the beginning. I think the kids were, with reason, pretty resistant to that, that they should have this- drop powder in

a glass, stir and produce a dad. They didn't know him well and didn't have any investment in loving or caring about him. So, where should I go from here.

I'm interested in looking at your retrospective, saying, "Look, you know, I'm not sure if you wouldn't have done it, or if you would have done it differently."

Probably a bit of both. You know, we're actively discussing whether we'll stay together. My youngest daughter is the one who has really been exploding recently, and the one who just doesn't accept him. He's devastated by this, having spent nine years of his life- he believes, parenting her and being in contact with her. I guess first off, I don't know if I would have gotten into a step parenting arrangement with this particular man had I given it more time. That's an unknown to me. We're quite different in our emotional energy, our pace, our hobbies. So first off, I'm not certain we would have gotten together. But assuming that there was something there and that we would have gotten together, I would have, if I were to go back now, I would say there would have been at least a year of dating, another year of trying to share leisure time, recreational pursuits, and maybe after a couple of years of that, to try maybe living together. And at that point, having a ceremony, if not a marriage, choosing to do something, a party or celebration that said we're creating a new family. Making sure there was a point in time where that ceremony or transition occurred. So, those are the things from our relationship that were really missing. We were together, he moved in, the courting period was very short and the children were kind of enwrapped within weeks of another person added. You know, that's kind of embarrassing to me when I look back at it. I just think it's so goofy to have expected it to have worked well, allowing it to proceed that way.

Did the kids feel that you had been taken away from them, or did they feel.....?

I think that that was part of it. I think that they wanted their dad back. My daughter was still idealizing that maybe mom and dad would get back together. Their dad was remarried by this time and about this time had another child. No- but had adopted his wife's daughter by this time, but especially my youngest, just fantasized all the time that she could get her dad and mom together. And I think moving him in shattered that fantasy.

**** NEXT DUMP ****

*** Interview # 1 DIANA Question # 18 card id 13436
Field: data ***

Or, rather, she began to obsess with it. If she could just get rid of Adam. I think all the kids did that. If we could just get rid of Adam, so projected a lot of their anger onto him.

Was there a time when things smoothed out with the kids?

Our first year together was just hell. I mean, this was the time when the kids damaged his car, stole a motorcycle, ended up in court. My middle son tried to burn the house down. I mean, this was a horror story. So our first Christmas together was in a motel, because we'd had a house fire a few weeks before. So I would say the whole first year was crisis after crisis after crisis. The next year or two, things stabilized a bit, and there were certainly not these incredible dramatic events. He and I were settling in together, developing a routine, getting the house in order, things that were making our lives more.... Then I had surgery in 1984 and became a disabled person in chronic pain. At that point, I mean, everything became complicated in our family. So he was faced with a wife who wasn't anything like the person he'd married, I don't mean married, but I mean a partner who he'd chosen and he suddenly had a totally different person. The kids were devastated by my disability. They thought of me as a really active person, and all this kind of stuff. And they, all three of them had difficulty coping with it. So, I think at that point, and from there on, I would say we just stayed in just kind of a pattern of sometimes being good and sometimes being just riddled with crisis, and just never feeling like the ordered, happy, organized family. Sort of rolling along from one little crisis to another. And I did feel that my kids took a role, one or the other of them, of trying to clear him out. Or of him thinking that he could make things better if only one of them were moved out. I don't know how I could...

So there was a bit of

It felt like rivalry. Like, who can get closest to mom. On the part of the boys, if they could get rid of Adam, they could have me to themselves, or on Adam's part, if he could just get rid of the boys, he could have me to himself. And relatively speaking, things were easier with my daughter. They've gotten worse as she's hit adolescence. So anyway, this all seems mildly depressing.

Well, it sounds like a difficult time. So was your partner quite active in....It sounds like when you began by saying that he was really intent on....

On parenting? He...instead of building a relationship with the kids or doing things with him as a friend or whatever, he'd been an Uncle at Large and a volunteer for Mental Health, so he knew how to do those things, but instead of

doing that, he immediately took a parental role of "the disciplinarian".

So being a parent rather than a friend.

Right, and sort of expecting them to obey him or listen to him without any relationship. And, I think I sort of cottoned on to that being...really that that was the problem, but he was really quite intimidated by the kids behavior. I mean, with reason. Their behavior was bizarre. But it was very, very hard for him to step back and let me be the parent. And we went to therapists at that point, and I heard therapists suggest that several times, just step back and the mother has a stronger relationship with them, and let her do her job, and be a support person to her. To paraphrase it, a lot of people at the time said, put your energy where the relationship is. In other words, Adam and Diana chose each other, so that's where the intensity should go. And actually, when our relationship worked best was when we took holidays together, when we had some spare time together, and we spent some time discussing family things as a couple.

So that was you and him together.

So certainly, that was the way to solve it, was to spend more time together, instead of spreading our energy around and running around on this sort of wrestling match he and I would get into around my parenting style and his parenting style, and who was the disciplinarian, and what was good discipline. We very much disagreed on some of that stuff.

Did you have any sense of his need for becoming the parent who wanted to be obeyed? Was he wanting to be included or was he needing to control?

I'd say yes, he didn't try to be included by being social, he tried to get included by being heard, and for him that was by being respected or obeyed. And I think he attempted to sort of be like his dad. Once he got into the relationship- and I mean his dad's a very controlling person everyone jumps for, and you know he used his voice a lot and he used his temper a lot. He's a very moody person as well. We all became aware that it wasn't so much what we were doing as what mood he was in at the time that would influence his parenting, or his relating. So I mean that in itself got quite bizarre, because it would be more dependent on his mood whether he would give you a hug or snap, as opposed to what was being done. As well, I'd sort of spent years learning to be a good parent and getting to a place where I felt the kids could deal with natural consequences and I'm not comfortable with spanking at all. And he grew up where spankings were in order, and so we had some really difficult struggles over that and finally agreed that there would be no more physical stuff. Occasionally, though, he's broken that rule and it's really

generated a lot of stuff. So, it's....when I talk about it, it just seems like a textbook. "Oh, look at this. These parents didn't discuss their parenting roles. They didn't talk about discipline. They didn't get clear on what they even want or expect from children. There just wasn't enough preparation. It doesn't really help now.

It sounds like you had some real complicating factors, and if the kids are acting against this, and then seeing your health or your activities being threatened and big changes in you. I mean, these are tremendous complications.

They are. That's correct. And we really do have a complex multi-problem family. There's no question. My daughter is also disabled and that creates it's own set of complicating things.

So you mentioned Adam's kids coming for visits. Was a that a further complication or how did that work out?

Well, he'd been cut off from his children and he always just said that he just wanted to see them again, and so I took the responsibility of building up contact with his ex-wife, arranging for the children to come and spend some summers, and we had them here for three years out of about five. His children were teenagers, about the same ages as mine, sort of spaced out in between. We had some sort of huge family holidays, with eight or so, because we happened to have friend's kids with us, too. And quite expensive holidays. His children came here with a lot of money, partly because the pound was high in comparison to the dollar. We really didn't know why they came with so much money, but we were really struggling as a family. My children didn't have money. We had very, very limited resources. So we would kind of mortgage our souls and ship them over here, have an expensive holiday and these kids would spend a great deal of money, and my kids would get incredibly resentful, and then we'd ship them home. There really weren't the parenting issues. I mean they were guests. They were here for a month or two months. I think a month or five weeks at most. So they were lovely people, and I enjoyed them very much and never really had occasion to or believed that there was any point in me acting as a parent. So, it was enjoyable, but expensive, and seemed to build quite a few resentments with my own children. You know, why could we spend all this money in the summer and why were they doing without all along.

It sounds like family time, or time together for you and Adam was a precious commodity. That kind of got used up as well.

Right. Absolutely. And all our spare money got used up, so that taking trips together got to be...We were spending...One year we spent about \$8,000 on a month's holiday and shipping the kids here, and so on. It wiped out our budget for the

year. And another year we did it a little cheaper, but it was camping with all these kids and staying in hotels when it rained, and one year we got a houseboat. We figured that was the most reasonable thing to do. Well, it was very expensive. The hope was to give them something or other that they would cling to. It was to know their dad, and to have some contact with him. I got really disheartened. As the kids got older, they spent all their time together and at the mall in West Edmonton, and I never saw them even converse with their dad. I think they had so much anger around the breakup of their parent's marriage, that there were big walls around these kids. So, to sort of cater to them and have these expensive holidays I think was really negative for them, when I look back at it. And I wonder whether I ever should have instigated all this. Adam's words were that he wanted to see them, and that would be really wonderful, but it appeared to create just all kinds of pain.

Did he feel distant from them by the time that they were...?

Oh, yes. He hadn't seen them since they were toddlers, and now they were teenagers. So he didn't know them and had fantasies about what they were like. He's not a converser or communicator anyway. So they would have these rigid conversations and I'd spend all my time trying to stimulate conversation or getting them to talk about their past or what they remembered. I just felt like a huge facilitator kind of person, and it just wasn't very, how would you put it....You can't make up for a parent being absent that many years. You can't fix it.

So you'd hoped for the happy reunion?

Yeah, and I'd hoped it would cheer him up. I mean, my interpretation when I met him, was that he was a person, that because of this tragedy, his children being wrenched away from him and being taken to England, and they lived under a different name with his best friend. It was a horror story. And I thought this caused his depression and sort of sadness was related to that. So I guess I figured that we'd have a happier life if he had more contact with his kids, but what I learned is that he'd always been depressed, and my hunch is that his wife couldn't put up with it any more than I could put up with this moody and difficult person. And while their separation wasn't very healthy, it wasn't very nice what happened, I still have quite a bit of empathy for her now, for the problems in the first years of their marriage. So, you know, I just stopped instigating as far as his kids were concerned, and he just talks about them and says, "I should send presents, I should send cards." But he never does. In the old days, I would have phoned for him, sent cards, bought presents. And now I'm saying, what he's really doing is what's appropriate. It must be appropriate, or he wouldn't do it. And what he needs to do is fantasize and just imagine.

Was his parenting style with his own children...?

Totally different than with mine. He was just a very indulgent parent, and when they asked for money, he gave it to them, and tried to be...What was similar was that he wanted hugs and attention and physical contact. But they were uncomfortable with that because they didn't know him. He was a stranger to them. But he wanted a hug or a cuddle often from his daughter and she was uncomfortable with that. And with his son, he liked to have his arm around him and tell him he was wonderful and it scared this kid, I think, because he didn't know his father. And in that way, he was that way with my children as well. Needing love and being very needy with these children. But I never saw him get into an authoritarian voice with his children, or set consequences or punish them in any way, or raise his voice. And he probably never had, it had only been a month or so. I think his approach was pretty similar to mine, as guests in the house.

I have no idea whether the parenting style I saw with my kids would have come out with his own children, you know, given enough time, because he seemed just totally indulgent. I didn't see any parenting going on. It's hard to describe. It was like a needy person who needed attention from them, and was willing to do almost anything to get that. He didn't look like a father with his children, just a very lonely person. Which seems natural since he hadn't seen them since....Oh and that's the other thing. Since they were pre-schoolers when he saw them last, he treated them as very small children. And that was incredibly offensive to these teenagers. You know, it was almost like baby talk, although maybe not quite that overt. My hunch is that they didn't feel respected or it felt kind of crazy to them.

So in his mind they hadn't grown or changed.

No they were still babies. Which seems so sad and yet so logical. It was his experience, of course.

I mean to take his position, it sounds like a difficult time for him, all the way around. It sounds like loss and distance from his own kids and wanting to be loved by your kids, and maybe not feeling that as much as he needed.

For sure they didn't feel they could forgive him. There's a certain degree now of collegiality with my sons. But I think even now my sons are quite distant from him, at an emotional level. So it was very difficult for Adam, and I guess what I've done recently is quite different from what I've done up 'until now. It's just that I've begun to say that I'm going to take care of myself, so I've distanced myself and tried to do a bit of my own work, tried to work on my own relationship with the children. That has been more satisfying for me than

trying to fix all the things that are wrong with his relationship with each of the children. I'm very critical and very analytical of their relationship. I don't agree with his relationship. He's just a very needy person who is very demanding when he's feeling sad or down. And probably he'd be very critical of my parenting style as well, if he were sitting here. I think if I'd been more authoritarian or had better boundaries things would have been better. To this day we disagree on parenting.

Did you take a fair bit of responsibility for trying to make everybody happy? To make the whole thing work?

Yeah, I did and I think that's a life pattern of mine. Trying to keep twelve plates spinning in the air simultaneously. And he was saying, "I don't know how you do it", and I now know how I did it. It was just at great cost to me. I think it's almost like demonstrating one's competency by trying to make an impossible situation...trying to make it better. So, I'm one of your typical helpers who tries to fix. It's a little bit scary to admit it, but...

But nice to hear you saying you recognize that you need to look after yourself.

Yeah, I think I made quite a few steps that way. And probably my disability was a gift that way. You know, I could no longer take myself for granted. I had to undertake more management. Yeah, I feel like I've made some steps in that direction.

So in relation to your own children, do you feel quite close there?

I do. Particularly in relation with both my sons. And, really proud of them. And as they're growing into nicer and nicer young men, I'm just amazed and thrilled. They're just beautiful young men. I- with my daughter there are more struggles. Most of them seem to be related to Adam, and so we're in the midst of some crises that way which I'm not able to deal with. She's just not able to live in the same house with him. So she's currently- right now in a hospital program for therapy. And part of this is due to her own disability, being deaf, and being an adolescent, she's going through some tough times herself, but a good part of it is her difficulty in getting along with Adam. So I'm looking at that and feeling that I have to make some decisions, and it's almost like...my hunch is that the decision is going to be for my daughter and that probably Adam and I won't live together, in the short term anyway. We'll try to come up with something that's less intense and each have our own residence, and see how that works. So it's....it may well be remedial and yet when we go through all the stages that I was talking about, that I should have done nine years ago, and come up with

something better, or we may separate and just give up. And my urges right now are more along separation. That's where it is.

Has your daughter been deaf since birth?

Yes. And she's profoundly deaf.

That's a handicap I know a little bit about. I worked for a year at the School for the Deaf, and just this past year been in my program with a student who's deaf, but she didn't go deaf until she was nineteen, but there's isolation that I find hard to imagine.

It's very difficult. What's sad is that my daughter gets attention from society by being difficult and gets the conversation and attention that she deserves as a human being only when she makes trouble. And so, when she's doing well and behaving herself and so on, she's ignored by society. So it's a fascinating situation. She's very very dependent on me, and is trying to become independent right now, and that's a difficult thing. I'm her advocate and so on. Parents of children with special needs end up in a very abnormal parenting role. And then of course, we're trying to disentangle ourselves from her in adolescence, and it's difficult.

That's a struggle even when things are at their best.

Oh, even in a healthy, regular family. Yeah, so when I say multi-problem, I really mean it.

Was Adam involved in learning to sign?

He learned in a very basic way, but his skills are not enough to carry on a conversation. He can instruct her, which is part of this whole pattern I was talking about, being a disciplinarian, but he's not able to understand her speech or signing enough to have what I consider a conversation. And that's a bone of contention between us. He feels that you can do just fine like, "Go to bed", or "Wash the dishes", or whatever, but I believe if he expects to do those kinds of things he should be able to have a conceptual conversation-what her life is like, where she's going. And I mean, you need more skill to do that. Her brothers sign, but his signing is very very rudimentary, and I think she reads body language a lot more than she reads anything else, and his body language is also quite aggressive, so get's a lot of non-verbals from him that maybe he doesn't intend. And that's very threatening for her. So....if I were magic I'd want for him to know more signs. It's so vital for me not to be the only link. Her brothers sign a bit, but she's pretty cut off from the world.

Something that has stayed in my mind from our conversation we had last time, was you talking about the adult relationship being the most delicate flower in the garden. I really liked that metaphor. It sounds like there has been a real division between what happened between you and Adam....obviously there were lots of good things there, or you never would have gotten together. And then, the whole business with the children on both sides sounds like it's been a struggle.

It's been very complicated. I'm probably into self-questioning and self-doubt a lot these days, but if I look back on how we got together I was going through a weak spot, I was making quite a few decisions in my life right at that spot, and Adam was very romantic and very...what's the word? Very assertive, very strong. Kind of swept me off my feet, which hadn't happened for a long time. And, so I think there was potential of good stuff, but in fact we got together so quickly that the knowledge of whether that good stuff was there was really limited, because we very quickly got into a parenting role that had none of the joy or interest of the courtship stuff. What I've learned since then is that he really made a decision to be different when we were going out, and pulled his socks together or up or whatever, and decided he was going to be assertive and strong and take care of himself. He wanted me, he wanted this family. That was it. So I think the behavior I saw when he was courting wasn't the real animal, or at least wasn't....He obviously has that in him, but that's not his standard way. I didn't give it enough time, either so he could keep practicing it, so it did become his standard way or enough time to figure out that this wasn't the way he was usually. So I kind of haven't ended up with what I got at the beginning. Nor does he have what he had at the beginning. I think I was in a more weak spot in my life, so I think I was in a more....What's the word? Dependent. While maybe somewhat physically dependent on people at times, I'm actually an incredibly independent person, and a stubborn person. And I'm not certain that he got an indication of how independent or stubborn I am.

So your courtship behavior might have been different as well?

No question. In both our cases it was quite different from what's real. And of course there was that tremendous pressure to get together quickly. He was very needy. I heard some bells in my head going, "Slow down", "Stop this", and I asked him to move out at one point, and all my instincts were saying that this was not going to work out but I kind of let myself get washed away.

I feel encouraged hearing you say this stuff because it sounds quite similar....

Oh, good, because I've been sitting here thinking you must think I'm an absolute insane person. I mean, when I tell this

story, I think, "I'm a competent, well trained, individual, and this is horrible."

If only we had the crystal ball, if we could anticipate, we'd probably never get out of bed. It would be too depressing.

In spite of my skills, and my kids tease me about this, I'm sure in terms of my personal life my skills are slowly transferring, but not nearly as speedily as I'd like.

I'm interested in looking back at this book (Getting the Love You Want) because I feel that some of the ideas that came up in there are important.

There's the part about the primitive brain, or the primitive part of us that chooses a relationship, and I would say the primitive part of me chose this relationship, but not for the right reasons. It chose for having protection, for having someone to look after my children, but all those other bits of my functioning were not in there making that decision. It was more of a fight or flight. That's interesting. It is a lot like the book.

For me, anyway, I'm amazed how if I sit down and write down things that are working and things that aren't working, I come up with a long list of things that to me seem like each one could be the kiss of death for the relationship, and yet whatever that primitive part is, making me feel like, physically ill if I'm not part of that relationship.

Wow, that's powerful.

Yeah, so at what point does rationality or common sense enter in? Sounds like there was part of you that was going counter to all the things that you had learned and assessed.

That's right. It was socialized. The educated part of me was trying to talk to the educated part of me and say, "You know, this is really stupid". But the primitive part was peripheral from that conflict, whatever it was. And, it feels very reactionary, like evolving back to the animals for a while. But it wasn't about conscious choice, or thinking that he was... Or thinking this is the rest of your life.

A sobering thought, isn't it?

Yeah. None of that. It was just....Hmmm this feels good. This feels safe. Let's become numb.

What about your own parenting, when you were being parented?

On my own? Oh, by my parents. Was it good or bad or what was it like?

Yeah.

I'm from a two parent background. One of those disappearing creatures. My parents were... They abdicated decision making a lot. I was the oldest child, and just even that gave me more power and responsibility and a lot of....There were some rewards. I felt appreciated that they asked me to do some responsible things. If I look back on the family that I was raised in, it was much more structured, and it was very enmeshed, but much more structured than the families that I have chosen to create, which are much more chaotic. My parents were much more rigid in their roles. Like my dad took out the garbage and my mother cooked. My dad occasionally made pancakes Sunday morning. But, for instance, for him to make pancakes Thursday night would be unheard of. So a lot of very clear roles and responsibilities. And he was a bit of a workaholic and she was at home raising us all and didn't work. I think that she was resentful. So I know that one of the biggest things I wanted was that women should have their own lives, they shouldn't stay at home resenting their children.

So you saw that from your mother not being able to experience it?

Yeah, so that's certainly something I consciously did. So when I did stay at home and try to raise kids, I was terribly depressed. I really have learned from those experiences that for me I need...But I'm trying to think of what else there is about this parenting stuff. My mother was a teacher, so she was really good with early childhood type activities.

So she was educated but then stayed home?

Yes. She was quite wonderful in terms of activities. I think she lost some of that wonder and excitement as I got older. I think probably my youngest brother and sister could not appreciate her- what I call early childhood stuff, like baking and having lots of other exciting activities to do. I think they didn't experience that in the way I did. So as the oldest child, I got a lot of that. And my dad was very quiet, gentle and would never spank a child. I did see him spank my brother once, when I was about five and my brother was about two. But that was unheard of. He was very gentle, very sensitive, very emotional. But he kept his emotions to himself. We never knew what they were about. We just knew he was emotional. There was never any description of what was going on.

Which was probably for men of his generation.

Oh yeah.

I laughed about the pancake example, because are men only capable of doing flapjacks. But I can think of all kinds of my father's generation, my former father in law, and pancakes was it.

That was before barbeques were invented.

Because it was outdoors and manly.

That's right. Transferable.

But you felt loved?

Yes, I did. I felt loved and respected in the family I grew up in and I mean it has it's dysfunctions, I think every family does, but I think on the whole scale of things I have a family that only creates loveable neurotics.

They're the best.

Well, I like them.

You said the family you grew up in was enmeshed. How did that come out or how did that effect you?

Well, the enmeshment that I'm aware of was that we all kind of read each other's minds and felt each other's feelings and a certain lack of privacy, especially as we hit the teen years. I can remember my dad being concerned that I was in my room alone, and he'd say things like, "You'll go mad if you look inward". So, there was a kind of a difficulty, and maybe this happened more when we hit adolescence, around letting people be their own person or being concerned that they might hurt themselves. The enmeshment- there were things like don't upset your mother, so that if mom had a little tear in her eye, dad would kind of boost us out of the house. No one was to upset mother. When you came back, it had all calmed down. So there were sure some messages that- don't reach out to people, don't talk about what's going on, pushing things down. The- how can I describe enmeshment? The other thing, and I don't know whether you'd call this enmeshment, what is abnormal about my family, and I see it in my cousins and my parents and so on, is that most of us seem to relate very strongly to our fathers. We then have great trouble relating to our mates, and then end up relating very strongly to our sons. So there is a kind of a thing of marrying your dad in our family. And there is a kind of- I don't know whether to call it enmeshment, but I felt very much I understood everything he felt, and woe begone, poor dad, feeling very supportive to him and kind of like a helpmate. And seeing my mother as the bitch, who irritated him and bothered him, even though if I think functionally of how she was with us, she was really very nice. So, that pattern is all through the family. And there's a degree of enmeshment in sort of being

able to read that man's mind, and I think I sort of lay that on the men I'm with. "If you really loved me, I'd be able to read your mind." And sort of getting love by doing that sort of thing. So it's enmeshment, but it's also sort of Oedipal or something.

That's an interesting description, because it's like intimacy where there is no question of boundary. It's- scary is not the right word, but...

It's scary.

But then if that transfers into your relationship with your mate, where there isn't mind reading, and your relationship with your sons where there is mind reading, that's interesting stuff.

Yeah, the inter-generational stuff- I think then my sons have difficulty affiliating with women who they're attracted to.

These women can't read their minds.

Right. It's quite sobering to see it in action, and know that there's a whole level of conversation going on in our family that isn't verbal. And not all of it is corrupt, by the way. I find that we do read each other's minds. It's hyper-sensitive kind of stuff that you can read each others minds, and assuming you can hurt each other terribly.

That's quite a different game than putting your cards on the table.

Oh, it is. I've spent a lifetime, well not a lifetime, but almost twenty years of my life trying to be clear, trying to be direct, because I was even trained in the therapeutic area on unconditional positive regard, a (end of tape side)

Hearing about the severity of the problems, like the kids doing some pretty extreme things must have been pretty taxing. Were there times when you guys ever considered what the desired effect was, like is it worth it?

Yeah, I certainly did. And I would bring it up a lot, and I would say that I thought we should live separately or do something so that we could get out of these horrible incidents which I was afraid were marking the kids for life. It's turned out that they're fine, or so far they're fine, but Yeah, at the time, I felt that it was bizarre and that we should be separating and that was really painful for him. And after we'd talk, I'd have that kind of, what I call that primitive feeling that we could make this better, or we could make it work, but at some level I'd fall back into the comfort and even if it wasn't happy part of the situation. It felt like to separate the money, to get separate, to separate

all our belongings would just add one more crisis. I was rationalizing, of course. But now we are at a point where we're talking about physically moving out, and so it is much more conscious now than ever.

Because I have this theory that has never been proven and it's really old fashioned in a way, but it is, you know, that if a couple can weather a crisis, then somehow that strengthens a relationship. But I don't think that's necessarily true.

I think it's true if the couple has a base. In other words, if we learn to love each other, learn to communicate, learn how to be a partner to each other, how to travel together, how to enjoy interests, if you're a mature couple, and then you have a crisis, then I think it does strengthen you or weaken you. The results happen from there.

Sure.

And probably with a mature couple, probably a crisis does strengthen you. I've seen that. Sometimes when a family has a crisis their relationship becomes even more wonderful, like with a child with special needs. But the other, the immature couple who has a crisis, I sort of think it's like sailors in a storm that have been tossed around on the deck and have been bruised. Maybe they've tied themselves to the mast so that they won't drown. It feels good when the storm stops, but you're numb and you're sore and you need comfort. It's not like you feel that you won anything. It's like you've survived a horrible crisis. So to me it's light years between those two things. But the impact is probably, on me anyway, in saying that we stay together is the rout of a team, instead of saying, "Man, are we ever a hot team, Did we ever do a good job of this". I don't feel anything of that in this situation. I feel that the kids have weathered it and I feel proud of them. But they were just some other people tied to the mast during the storm, as opposed to, "Gee, I'm so proud of how my son's become a mechanic". And I think listening to him and hearing how he was a part of that happening. Instead of that, I think, thank God he's survived he's survived and trusts himself enough to become a mechanic.

To have his own life.

So, it's funny. I really like your question, because I think, faced with a standard family, you know the kind who got together, lived a long time, had their children, stayed together, that that's very true. Their crises just made things sweeter and more poignant and more beautiful. But, it's like the same process in a family like this is feeling like, "We lost". So there's not a bond.

I don't know if those normal families exist.

There's one I know of in St. Albert. In fact, I envy them tremendously. But they're marvelous. Maybe they do things differently. They appear, anyway, to have this gorgeous life. We should somehow study them.

I've started....I noticed myself doing this the other night, past these suburban homes that never appealed to me in any way, shape or form, with the little table lamps on, and the soft light making me think, "Oh, wow, would I ever like to be in there!"

Just imagine, getting up Saturday morning and mowing the grass and my partner doing whatever.

And even the proceeds in twenty or thirty years- socially, economically, they're so stable. They probably have money in the bank for their retirement. Maybe they have a place at the lake. Couples who've been together for twenty years and are still in their forties, I think I envy them, not for the tacky -tacky, but for that incredible stability that has eluded me.

Mad money is not a problem. They have lots of it.

Right. It's been years of building up. They don't have mortgages or anything. These friends of mine I visited, I came to the door after dinner and they had finished doing the dishes and they were sitting having a glass of wine at the kitchen table, looking out on this forest that their house sits on. I hadn't seen him for about ten years, and he's just turned into an even more gorgeous older man, and she's turned into an even more gorgeous older woman, and they've fostered two children in addition to raising two of their own, so they've been involved in the community.

So this beauty was coming from within, it wasn't just that they were well tanned from being out on the golf course.

No, although that helped. (laughter) No, they are beautiful people, they've won citizens of the year award and stuff like that. But I do look at them and think that I can't find another family like that.

Are some of your thoughts kind of future oriented now? What does the future hold for me? What does the future hold for us as a couple?

Yeah. They definitely are, and we're consciously talking about separation and some time to figure out if there is anything there. And I think your question before of "There must have been something there to get you together", that's now the question we're pursuing, is there something there? And there may have been something there that isn't there now that I'm not seeing, and what effect my disability has had on

the family. But the biggest plan for me is to be stable, to be an independent woman, with a reasonable kind of lifestyle, planning for retirement, so that if I'm in a relationship, it's because it's a relationship I choose, and that I want. I, personally, with my own stubbornness and independence, can't handle a relationship that I need. That just feels sick to me. So as opposed to trying to find a relationship and making it one that meets my wants, I'm going to try to get myself the way I want to be, and then consider a relationship. I don't know that it will ever be like a couple. I get far more support and give or are more support in a community of friends than I do in a relationship. I don't know if that's being in my forties or what, but I've just learned to love my support system, and get just a ton of stuff from those people.

On the one hand it sounds really extreme, but ultimately it seems basic.

Community is basic, and that's something I didn't understand as a child. Because of the independence. I want to be a completely independent person in a community. And there's a contradiction between the two, but there is that feeling that you can stand alone and yet affiliate by choice, not by need. Couples in the olden days got together because they needed each other- money, someone to protect while the woman bore the children. I don't need any of that stuff. So those kinds of relationships are gone and they're not appropriate any more, just irrelevant.

I think that business of being together- fellowship, is one word that describes the kind of being together at the community level. And whether that's as colleagues, although you immediately get politics and all the other stuff that goes along with that, but it is, to me it is relating at another level. And maybe without all the nitty gritty stuff that goes into everyday life, an yet the love or the sharing is real.

Yeah, I'm truly looking for a community to understand, and not the kind of mommy and daddy and two children. A lovely, irrelevant kind of picture. My children certainly don't need....I mean they have their own dad, they have a mom.

Let's stop for now, because it's nearly time, but maybe next time we can start by talking about your kids' relationship with their dad. Is he still a player?

Yes and no. He's not super involved with them. If I were magic he would be a lot more involved, but to some degree with the oldest.

(End of first interview)

SECOND INTERVIEW WITH DIANA

The last bit we did on the tape the other day, we sort of came to a place where it seemed good to stop, and then said we'd talk about the kids- there's a lot of terminology around. What are you comfortable with natural father, biological father?

I've never really thought about this. I guess I just call him their dad.

You gave an interesting answer when I asked if he still figures in their lives. You said, "Well, yes and no", which I thought had some nice ambivalence to it.

I guess that is kind of fascinating. My belief in it is that the less present and active he is in their lives, the more he is present as a mystical creature for them. In other words, they create a fantasy dad, the less he's there. So they do have a dad, whatever amount he's involved. I think a more realistic dad the more he's involved. But they create him any way. It's quite fascinating. When my daughter was younger she had a kind of a mysticism about her dad that was- and the longer she went without seeing him, the more creative she was in how he would be and when she would see him again, it would bring her back to reality and what was real. He's uh- I'm trying to think of his involvement with the kids. He's now quite involved with our oldest son, Bob, who's a mechanic. Bob goes out to his farm and bales hay and fixes vehicles and he brings his dad's vehicles into the shop. So Bob is quite devoted to being a helpful, oldest son to his dad. They appear to have...Well, when Bob was studying mechanics at NAIT, he and his dad had lunch together every day, and that was a massive increase in their time together. They probably hadn't spent that much time together since he was a little boy, and since we were together. So, it was really neat because there was that shared interest in NAIT and being a technical person and so on that they could share, and then on the other hand with his mechanical stuff where he was able to assist his dad and to have some expertise that perhaps his dad doesn't have, or at least it's a very supportive kind of reciprocal kind of thing.

Those seem like manly pursuits. Like farming or fixing your cars, or whatever.

That's right. When you think in terms of a....It's like his dad is able to be a kind of a mentor to him. I know that he has a mentor in his work. There's fellow he works with who's a mechanic who he worked with as an apprentice. This guy is just amazing. He's provided a lot of support to Bob as he's become an adult and just things like keeping your tools neat, and being proud of your tools. But it does appear that his dad is able to relate to him, man to man, these days and that

they do have quite a strong relationship, which I think is really neat.

If that's been kind of tenuous over the years, it must be a kind of rediscovery.

I think so, in a way. I think the old relationships were based on Bob being a child, and sometimes the troubled child, the acting up kind of kid, and his dad being quite involved, he was a quite involved parent. He wasn't the kind of parent when we were married who just left it to me. I think he was really quite active with all three children. But definitely the relationship deteriorated once we were separated. Bob lived with him for some time, and that didn't work very well, and her moved out in anger, back into our house. So there were definitely some troubled times, where he popped back and forth. But now it seems to be quite solid, and I don't think he gets on particularly well with his step mother, but he's learned how to manage her and how to be with her in ways that she's comfortable with. And I'm not certain....Bob's married now, so I'm not sure how his wife is doing, adjusting to that side of the family, but I know they're working on it.

How do you see his relationship with his dad affecting what's gone on at your house?

Well, Bob lived with a girl friend, and moved out to his dad's with a girl friend. So there was quite a bit of crisis between him and Adam, quite a bit of crisis between him and his dad. I'm trying to think how I would label it. I guess if I were to go back and say, if I were to be magic, what would have improved and have made these things all better, it would have been for Derek to have stayed involved with Bob all the way through those teen years, and to have had a stronger presence with him in those years. He was just developing his own new family, and I was developing my new family, and I think at that point the children were absent in their dad's family. So I think when I look back, the lack of John's presence at those times made the kids idealize their own dad and turn Adam into the "bad dad". So had he been more present and more involved with them, I think Adam and I would have had more time as a couple, so we could have increased our strength, but also Adam wouldn't have had to feel so driven to be involved with the children in a disciplinary way. When I look back, I really kind of kick myself that I didn't ask for joint custody. That I wanted custody to be with me and I wanted him to have full access. And in fact what he did with the joint custody procedure, the kids spent quite a bit of time with him initially, but I, in theory had custody, and I think somehow that cuts the other parent out, and it's like they divorce their family. I don't think a parent should have to divorce their children. I think they should divorce their partner. So if I look back, that's the one thing I would change. We would have had a joint custody agreement, not a

single custody. There wasn't a lot known about it at the time. I was afraid and I'm sure if I would have pursued it, he would have been very willing.

It's interesting to hear how the children played out the loyalty.

Stayed faithful to their father and their mother.

And idealizing dad.

And probably idealizing me, would be the other thing I would think that- you know that they've always been very negative about their step mom. And you know, she's just a regular human being. She certainly doesn't deserve this label of "Witch of the North". That's awful. She has her problems and she has her strengths, but she's not the figure the children make her out to be. Yeah, loyalty was definitely an issue and the children still saw themselves as having to side with their natural parents, in spite of quite a bit of divorce- quite a bit of divorce?- quite a bit of counselling and quite a bit of trying to separate very consciously. Unconsciously, the loyalty was still there.

So the "good" parents were mom and dad....

And the two bad guys were the step parents. Yeah. Witches and Trolls.

I'm trying to think of other things that we touched on last time that we can go back to. Have you thought of things in the meantime?

I realized- I found this out in the reflection- and I especially found in reflecting over Adam's and my relationship as we talked, it's just that sometimes we were in so much crisis, you forget the number of years you've spent trying to make this stuff work. And you forget the good times and the fun. Reviewing the holidays and so on was really quite helpful. I guess the only thought I've had as a result of what I've said is that I need to spend more time reflecting on our history. And you know, looking at what it was really about. Those nine years of trying to make it work, and trying to draw as much learning from that as possible. So I think I tend to push it all down. I think there are so many sort of crises in it that I would rather not think about, when in fact thinking about them reminds me about some of the good stuff, too.

One of the things that came through for me in reflecting on my own experience, was realizing how much I had grown as a result of all the painfulness and adversity. And it's kind of a sick wish, but I wish I could have grown that was before my marriage fell apart, and before there was all that pain with

my kids my ex-wife. But it was like all that stuff had to happen before I could respond out of my own need to not feel so hurt and not feel so damaged, and so desperate for a place to belong. But that doesn't happen.....

No, we don't get to do instant replays.

Something that you had mentioned as being a bonding thing that you saw in blended families, was having rituals and so on. Is it too late for that?

In my particular family? I don't know. One of the things that we're sort of talking about right now is being physically separate and trying to assess our relationship, and say if there is really something here. In a sense, that would provide us with the opportunity of some ceremonies if we decided to go back together. So as you ask me this question, I'm going....I feel kind of depressed and sad about trying this new approach, and yet the other side of me is saying, yes, this does have the potential for trying to add these kinds of ceremonies to our lives, and trying to formalize whatever it is we're trying to do, and make that spoken. So, yeah, I have kind of been thinking and there is a possibility of that. But it feels like an awful lot of what's gone before needs to be exorcised- it's like there are bad spirits, to get back to "is there some good stuff". Money and time and energy and a lot wasted effort and a lot of garbage. It's quite a pile up. It's like a cleaning house ceremony.

I think the whole idea of moving into separate places, to me I think my initial response to that would have been, "Oh, that's a loss", but maybe that's an opportunity to discover who you are now, sort of thing, because a lot of the pressure that you had with the kids is off now.

That's right. It's almost like at the point where all that happened, if I look back and judge myself, I would say I lack boundaries. Like, I lack the ability to say, "No, I've got to slow this down." And, so now I have an opportunity to go back and have boundaries, and to say, "What is in this relationship if I do say no we've got to slow it down". So it doesn't feel....well, at times it feels like a loss, and I'm ruining this relationship, and you'll be the sad old lady who lives alone, and then another part of me feels that this is a part of my personal growth, and this is vital to find out if there is something in this relationship at all.

And an opportunity to evaluate on however long you want to carry on for, "Do I feel better on my own, or do I feel better together."

And do we like each other? That's one of the fascinating things. Even from just talking about this, we're getting on

better. So the fact of discussing separation makes us treat each other with more respect.

So it's like the trade-off between quality and quantity of time.

And taking someone for granted. There was a TV show on the other night. There were two partners, a male and a female. The female decided to get married, and these two cops had been through all kinds of stuff together over the years- whatever, shoot outs and so on. I was thinking that is sort of what our relationship is like- Adam's and mine. Like being in a patrol car for nine years.

Visiting from crisis to crisis.

Yeah. And you know, it's time to get out of the car, to see if there's a social life or anything else, or if in fact we've been good partners but there's not a lot left .

It would be interesting to see how your son who has gone through his own marriage ceremony would kind of see....If you and Adam decided, let's get married, that might be a more meaningful thing for him.

I think so, in some funny ways, he's grown a lot in the last couple of years, and I also believe that he's quite....relatively young to be getting married, and so is going through a lot of self examination- "Did I do the right thing? Did she do the right thing? and Have they timed it right?" So, yeah, I think it would have a lot of impact on him.

I don't know how your kids relate or share similar ideas or whatever, but he might be able to win the other kids over. I'm speculating now, but... I think that's a real fascinating series of possibilities....

Yeah of what me might do as a family. Carve ourselves out. Mmmhmmm.

I guess I'm thinking about Adam and his experience of being a step parent. Did he feel threatened by the relationship that your children had with dad?

I really don't know. I didn't get a strong feeling that he did. If anything, I think he would have preferred him to be more involved with the kids. It's my hunch that he learned better in a simpler situation. We really share that, that with all the kids around it's a very difficult situation. So the more involvement Derek had as a parent, the more time Adam and I would have alone. And in the beginning, Derek was taking more responsibility for the children, so in terms of alone time in the first year, we actually got some alone

time. It didn't stop all the crises, but we did have some fun. So, if he was threatened by Derek, I never- it never became an obvious thing. I'm trying to think....I don't think he liked Derek very much. I think he found him really...what's the word- indecisive. I think he found him kind of weak that way. But, yeah, I think he probably would have enjoyed it if Derek had taken a stronger role. That's a really good question, one I'd be interested in what he would say to that.

I remember you saying last time that Adam was really needing affection from the kids. Were there things that he could do that seemed to... that seemed like natural approaches to getting closer to the kids?

That I saw him do? It's sort of funny. He had a nephew-at-large and he'd had this nephew when I met him, and I saw him do all the things you do to get close to kids, with this nephew. I didn't see him do that with my children. It was like there was a barrier there, that wasn't there with John, his nephew. So, with John, he sit down and play a game, or just visit, or ask him how his life was or take him to a show, or whatever. He seemed to have quite a repertoire of things to do with John. Now that decreased as he became more involved with our family, but I didn't see him use all that spontaneous behavior with my children. It was as if he couldn't see himself as a friend for them, he could only see himself as "the father", and he was stuck in that role. I'm trying to come up with some things that he did. He did all kinds of driving them around and getting them places and a lot of the brute labor of trying to raise kids in this age. I don't think the children appreciated it. I don't recall him ever trying to teach them things. I mean there were times when he's gone on canoeing trips and so on, and taken them along. He's taken John to the mountains. One time I think he did, when his two children came here I think he went off for a week and took one of my kids with him. I think one of my children went rather reluctantly. But I didn't get an impression that they had a good time. His kids were really old and they were really mall rats at that period, and it seemed like they didn't have a good time. So I think a lot of the involvement that he attempted wasn't very much appreciated, and an awful lot of it was really rigid, structured stuff. But he certainly has the ability to do those other creative things. I've seen him do it. I've seen him do volunteer things and other situations that are very warm, very supportive and so on, but at some level there was a wall. I guess my belief is that the wall is around grief. That having lost his own children, there was a buried anger there with mine that never became very conscious, but somehow I felt he could be more spontaneous, more playful, more friendly with others. I feel real badly saying that, because I'm sure in the nine years he's done a multitude of good

things. But I'm not sure of any real ...instances (can't make this out on the tape)

That has to be a bit discouraging for him, putting out this energy and none of it's coming back.

Yeah. And my hunch is that the more he would try and do things and the less things would come back, the more rigid he would get. So it would sort of perpetuate less spontaneous, less playfulness, person to person stuff. And make him more and more directive, which I think is the part that got on the kids nerves. They just did not like that authoritarian, parental stance.

That's a hard cycle to break out of.

I think so. I think so. I think for him it was, cornered, he gets more and more into that person, and I think feels more and more depressed. I don't think he likes being that person. I think that's how his own dad was, and he vowed never to be like his dad, so it's my hunch that depressed him more and more.

So he just kind of took that on as a burden.

Mmmmmhmmmm.

Did you guys discuss that?

A lot. A lot. I think he always interpreted my trying to talk about it as criticism. I would try and give him feedback on the physical stuff- like, "You're standing over the child, your voice is raised, your face is red, you're pointing your finger- that's giving them an image of control, and they're scared and so on. Often he'd be saying something relatively mild, or even more informational, but the body language just looked incredibly aggressive and dominating. But it was very hard for him to hear that sort of thing. I tried a number of different ways.....The kids came to you and you gave advice. What about just trying to listen for a while, because he's got the skills, he knows how to reflect and be sensitive, but it was almost like he was driven, that at some level he was driven to fail and that the kids were driven to mourn him for failing. It's a real scapegoat situation, where he's the scapegoat, and I guess I have trouble imagining that particular person succeeding in that particular family.

Can you describe how you see the scapegoat scenario.

Well, no matter how....It was like no matter what he did it was wrong. I mean...And I know he was a scapegoat in his own family, and I know he spent a long time learning how to be one as a child. So, in our family, which was unstable and volatile and nobody knows who who is, but they know that mom

is still the boss, I think it became very easy to do that. And his....I feel so psychoanalytical. I feel just full of psychobabble, but it appeared to me to be a wrestling match to see who would be the scapegoat in the family. So on his part it would be like if one of the kids weren't there, it would be fine. So he would pick one of the kids who wasn't functioning the way or behaving the way he thought they should.

Bad guy of the week, sort of thing?

Right. And it sort of stuck with Bob until Bob left home, and then it shifted to Jay, and then I believe it shifted to Belle. But Jay has moved back in, right now, so now it's pretty overtly that it's Belle- from his perspective. But then from their perspective, he's the bad guy. And if only he were out of the system, everything would be fine. I'm in there somewhere. Nobody's the bad guy, but you're all wearing me out, and I do start to feel helpless with that. I don't like the scapegoating situation myself. I certainly wasn't the kind of scapegoat Adam was, in my family. I've sort of been made light of in my family. There's a degree to which that's scapegoating, and so I think it echoed some really uncomfortable patterns for me, things that I never wanted to live with, which is of course, not very helpful if you're going, "I don't want to live with this". I don't want my children to be scapegoats, I don't want my partner to be a scapegoat, just- I don't want this. It's sort of like we're divinely damaged when we interact, and I'm a divinely damaged person, and in this case it was a divinely damaged situation. I have such a theoretical dislike for scapegoating, it's just such a horrible thing to do.

I mean, even in a hen's situation it's not really great, is it?

No. It's terrible. So that's sort of custom made to make me feel horrible and inadequate.

When I hear you describing this, it's like there were the four of them chasing each other around playing scapegoat tag....

And me trying to make them happy.

So you were outside that, or overseeing that?

Yeah, somehow I was kind of like the mother to the whole bunch. And I've often said that I wanted a partner, I didn't want another child. I have no idea whether the parenting style I saw with my kids would have come out with his own children, you know, given enough time, because he seemed just totally indulgent. I didn't see any parenting going on. It's hard to describe. It was like a needy person who needed

attention from them, and was willing to do almost anything to get that. He didn't look like a father with his children, just a very lonely person. Which seems natural since he hadn't seen them since....Oh and that's the other thing. Since they were pre-schoolers when he saw them last, he treated them as very small children. And that was incredibly offensive to these teenagers. You know, it was almost like baby talk, although maybe not quite that overt. My hunch is that they didn't feel respected or it felt kind of crazy to them.

So in his mind they hadn't grown or changed.

No they were still babies. Which seems so sad and yet so logical. It was his experience, of course.

I mean to take his position, it sounds like a difficult time for him, all the way around. It sounds like loss and distance from his own kids and wanting to be loved by your kids, and maybe not feeling that as much as he needed.

For sure they didn't feel they could forgive him. There's a certain degree now of collegiality with my sons. But I think even now my sons are quite distant from him, at an emotional level. So it was very difficult for Adam, and I guess what I've done recently is quite different from what I've done up 'until now. It's just that I've begun to say that I'm going to take care of myself, so I've distanced myself and tried to do a bit of my own work, tried to work on my own relationship with the children. That has been more satisfying for me than trying to fix all the things that are wrong with his relationship with each of the children. I'm very critical and very analytical of their relationship. I don't agree with his relationship. He's just a very needy person who is very demanding when he's feeling sad or down. And probably he'd be very critical of my parenting style as well, if he were sitting here. I think if I'd been more authoritarian or had better boundaries things would have been better. To this day we disagree on parenting.

Did you take a fair bit of responsibility for trying to make everybody happy? To make the whole thing work?

Yeah, I did and I think that's a life pattern of mine. Trying to keep twelve plates spinning in the air simultaneously. And he was saying, "I don't know how you do it", and I now know how I did it. It was just at great cost to me. I think it's almost like demonstrating one's competency by trying to make an impossible situation...trying to make it better. So, I'm one of your typical helpers who tries to fix. It's a little bit scary to admit it, but...

But nice to hear you saying you recognize that you need to look after yourself.

Yeah, I think I made quite a few steps that way. And probably my disability was a gift that way. You know, I could no longer take myself for granted. I had to undertake more management. Yeah, I feel like I've made some steps in that direction.

So in relation to your own children, do you feel quite close there?

I do. Particularly in relation with both my sons. And, really proud of them. And as they're growing into nicer and nicer young men, I'm just amazed and thrilled. They're just beautiful young men. I- with my daughter there are more struggles. Most of them seem to be related to Adam, and so we're in the midst of some crises that way which I'm not able to deal with. She's just not able to live in the same house with him. So she's currently- right now in a hospital program for therapy. And part of this is due to her own disability, being deaf, and being an adolescent, she's going through some tough times herself, but a good part of it is her difficulty in getting along with Adam. So I'm looking at that and feeling that I have to make some decisions, and it's almost like....my hunch is that the decision is going to be for my daughter and that probably Adam and I won't live together, in the short term anyway. We'll try to come up with something that's less intense and each have our own residence, and see how that works. So it's....it may well be remedial and yet when we go through all the stages that I was talking about, that I should have done nine years ago, and come up with something better, or we may separate and just give up. And my urges right now are more along separation. That's where it is.

Has your daughter been deaf since birth?

Yes. And she's profoundly deaf.

That's a handicap I know a little bit about. I worked for a year at the School for the Deaf, and just this past year been in my program with a student who's deaf, but she didn't go deaf until she was nineteen, but there's isolation that I find hard to imagine.

It's very difficult. What's sad is that my daughter gets attention from society by being difficult and gets the conversation and attention that she deserves as a human being only when she makes trouble. And so, when she's doing well and behaving herself and so on, she's ignored by society. So it's a fascinating situation. She's very very dependent on me, and is trying to become independent right now, and that's a difficult thing. I'm her advocate and so on. Parents of children with special needs end up in a very abnormal parenting role. And then of course, we're trying to

disentangle ourselves from her in adolescence, and it's difficult.

That's a struggle even when things are at their best.

Oh, even in a healthy, regular family. Yeah, so when I say multi-problem, I really mean it.

Was Adam involved in learning to sign?

He learned in a very basic way, but his skills are not enough to carry on a conversation. He can instruct her, which is part of this whole pattern I was talking about, being a disciplinarian, but he's not able to understand her speech or signing enough to have what I consider a conversation. And that's a bone of contention between us. He feels that you can do just fine like, "Go to bed", or "Wash the dishes", or whatever, but I believe if he expects to do those kinds of things he should be able to have a conceptual conversation- what her life is like, where she's going. And I mean, you need more skill to do that. Her brothers sign, but his signing is very very rudimentary, and I think she reads body language a lot more than she reads anything else, and his body language is also quite aggressive, so get's a lot of non-verbals from him that maybe he doesn't intend. And that's very threatening for her. So....if I were magic I'd want for him to know more signs. It's so vital for me not to be the only link. Her brothers sign a bit, but she's pretty cut off from the world.

Something that has stayed in my mind from our conversation we had last time, was you talking about the adult relationship being the most delicate flower in the garden. I really liked that metaphor. It sounds like there has been a real division between what happened between you and Adam....obviously there were lots of good things there, or you never would have gotten together. And then, the whole business with the children on both sides sounds like it's been a struggle.

It's been very complicated. I'm probably into self-questioning and self-doubt a lot these days, but if I look back on how we got together I was going through a weak spot, I was making quite a few decisions in my life right at that spot, and Adam was very romantic and very...what's the word? Very assertive, very strong. Kind of swept me off my feet, which hadn't happened for a long time. And, so I think there was potential of good stuff, but in fact we got together so quickly that the knowledge of whether that good stuff was there was really limited, because we very quickly got into a parenting role that had none of the joy or interest of the courtship stuff. What I've learned since then is that he really made a decision to be different when we were going out, and pulled his socks together or up or whatever, and decided he was going to be assertive and strong and take care

of himself. He wanted me, he wanted this family. That was it. So I think the behavior I saw when he was courting wasn't the real animal, or at least wasn't....He obviously has that in him, but that's not his standard way. I didn't give it enough time, either so he could keep practicing it, so it did become his standard way or enough time to figure out that this wasn't the way he was usually. So I kind of haven't ended up with what I got at the beginning. Nor does he have what he had at the beginning. I think I was in a more weak spot in my life, so I think I was in a more....What's the word? Dependent. While maybe somewhat physically dependent on people at times, I'm actually an incredibly independent person, and a stubborn person. And I'm not certain that he got an indication of how independent or stubborn I am.

So your courtship behavior might have been different as well?

No question. In both our cases it was quite different from what's real. And of course there was that tremendous pressure to get together quickly. He was very needy. I heard some bells in my head going, "Slow down", "Stop this", and I asked him to move out at one point, and all my instincts were saying that this was not going to work out but I kind of let myself get washed away.

I feel encouraged hearing you say this stuff because it sounds quite similar....

Oh, good, because I've been sitting here thinking you must think I'm an absolute insane person. I mean, when I tell this story, I think, "I'm a competent, well trained, individual, and this is horrible."

If only we had the crystal ball, if we could anticipate, we'd probably never get out of bed. It would be too depressing.

In spite of my skills, and my kids tease me about this, I'm sure in terms of my personal life my skills are slowly transferring, but not nearly as speedily as I'd like.

I'm interested in looking back at this book (Getting the Love You Want) because I feel that some of the ideas that came up in there are important.

There's the part about the primitive brain, or the primitive part of us that chooses a relationship, and I would say the primitive part of me chose this relationship, but not for the right reasons. It chose for having protection, for having someone to look after my children, but all those other bits of my functioning were not in there making that decision. It was more of a fight or flight. That's interesting. It is a lot like the book.

For me, anyway, I'm amazed how if I sit down and write down things that are working and things that aren't working, I come up with a long list of things that to me seem like each one could be the kiss of death for the relationship, and yet whatever that primitive part is, making me feel like, physically ill if I'm not part of that relationship.

Wow, that's powerful.

Yeah, so at what point does rationality or common sense enter in? Sounds like there was part of you that was going counter to all the things that you had learned and assessed.

That's right. It was socialized. The educated part of me was trying to talk to the educated part of me and say, "You know, this is really stupid". But the primitive part was peripheral from that conflict, whatever it was. And, it feels very reactionary, like evolving back to the animals for a while. But it wasn't about conscious choice, or thinking that he was... Or thinking this is the rest of your life.

A sobering thought, isn't it?

Yeah. None of that. It was just....Hmmm this feels good. This feels safe. Let's become numb.

What about your own parenting, when you were being parented?

On my own? Oh, by my parents. Was it good or bad or what was it like?

Yeah.

I'm from a two parent background. One of those disappearing creatures. My parents were... They abdicated decision making a lot. I was the oldest child, and just even that gave me more power and responsibility and a lot of....There were some rewards. I felt appreciated that they asked me to do some responsible things. If I look back on the family that I was raised in, it was much more structured, and it was very enmeshed, but much more structured than the families that I have chosen to create, which are much more chaotic. My parents were much more rigid in their roles. Like my dad took out the garbage and my mother cooked. My dad occasionally made pancakes Sunday morning. But, for instance, for him to make pancakes Thursday night would be unheard of. So a lot of very clear roles and responsibilities. And he was a bit of a workaholic and she was at home raising us all and didn't work. I think that she was resentful. So I know that one of the biggest things I wanted was that women should have their own lives, they shouldn't stay at home resenting their children.

So you saw that from your mother not being able to experience it?

Yeah, so that's certainly something I consciously did. So when I did stay at home and try to raise kids, I was terribly depressed. I really have learned from those experiences that for me I need...But I'm trying to think of what else there is about this parenting stuff. My mother was a teacher, so she was really good with early childhood type activities.

So she was educated but then stayed home?

Yes. She was quite wonderful in terms of activities. I think she lost some of that wonder and excitement as I got older. I think probably my youngest brother and sister could not appreciate her- what I call early childhood stuff, like baking and having lots of other exciting activities to do. I think they didn't experience that in the way I did. So as the oldest child, I got a lot of that. And my dad was very quiet, gentle and would never spank a child. I did see him spank my brother once, when I was about five and my brother was about two. But that was unheard of. He was very gentle, very sensitive, very emotional. But he kept his emotions to himself. We never knew what they were about. We just knew he was emotional. There was never any description of what was going on.

Which was probably for men of his generation.

Oh yeah.

I laughed about the pancake example, because are men only capable of doing flapjacks. But I can think of all kinds of my father's generation, my former father in law, and pancakes was it.

That was before barbeques were invented.

Because it was outdoors and manly.

That's right. Transferable.

But you felt loved?

Yes, I did. I felt loved and respected in the family I grew up in and I mean it has it's dysfunctions, I think every family does, but I think on the whole scale of things I have a family that only creates loveable neurotics.

They're the best.

Well, I like them.

You said the family you grew up in was enmeshed. How did that come out or how did that effect you?

Well, the enmeshment that I'm aware of was that we all kind of read each other's minds and felt each other's feelings and a certain lack of privacy, especially as we hit the teen years. I can remember my dad being concerned that I was in my room alone, and he'd say things like, "You'll go mad if you look inward". So, there was a kind of a difficulty, and maybe this happened more when we hit adolescence, around letting people be their own person or being concerned that they might hurt themselves. The enmeshment- there were things like don't upset your mother, so that if mom had a little tear in her eye, dad would kind of boost us out of the house. No one was to upset mother. When you came back, it had all calmed down. So there were sure some messages that- don't reach out to people, don't talk about what's going on, pushing things down. The- how can I describe enmeshment? The other thing, and I don't know whether you'd call this enmeshment, what is abnormal about my family, and I see it in my cousins and my parents and so on, is that most of us seem to relate very strongly to our fathers. We then have great trouble relating to our mates, and then end up relating very strongly to our sons. So there is a kind of a thing of marrying your dad in our family. And there is a kind of- I don't know whether to call it enmeshment, but I felt very much I understood everything he felt, and woe begone, poor dad, feeling very supportive to him and kind of like a helpmate. And seeing my mother as the bitch, who irritated him and bothered him, even though if I think functionally of how she was with us, she was really very nice. So, that pattern is all through the family. And there's a degree of enmeshment in sort of being able to read that man's mind, and I think I sort of lay that on the men I'm with. "If you really loved me, I'd be able to read your mind." And sort of getting love by doing that sort of thing. So it's enmeshment, but it's also sort of Oedipal or something.

That's an interesting description, because it's like intimacy where there is no question of boundary. It's- scary is not the right word, but...

It's scary.

But then if that transfers into your relationship with your mate, where there isn't mind reading, and your relationship with your sons where there is mind reading, that's interesting stuff.

Yeah, the inter-generational stuff- I think then my sons have difficulty affiliating with women who they're attracted to.

These women can't read their minds.

Right. It's quite sobering to see it in action, and know that there's a whole level of conversation going on in our family that isn't verbal. And not all of it is corrupt, by the way. I find that we do read each other's minds. It's hypersensitive kind of stuff that you can read each others minds, and assuming you can hurt each other terribly.

That's quite a different game than putting your cards on the table.

Oh, it is. I've spent a lifetime, well not a lifetime, but almost twenty years of my life trying to be clear, trying to be direct, because I was even trained in the therapeutic area on unconditional positive regard, a (end of tape side)

Hearing about the severity of the problems, like the kids doing some pretty extreme things must have been pretty taxing. Were there times when you guys ever considered what the desired effect was, like is it worth it?

Yeah, I certainly did. And I would bring it up a lot, and I would say that I thought we should live separately or do something so that we could get out of these horrible incidents which I was afraid were marking the kids for life. It's turned out that they're fine, or so far they're fine, but Yeah, at the time, I felt that it was bizarre and that we should be separating and that was really painful for him. And after we'd talk, I'd have that kind of, what I call that primitive feeling that we could make this better, or we could make it work, but at some level I'd fall back into the comfort and even if it wasn't happy part of the situation. It felt like to separate the money, to get separate, to separate all our belongings would just add one more crisis. I was rationalizing, of course. But now we are at a point where we're talking about physically moving out, and so it is much more conscious now than ever.

But I did feel very distant from that kind of stuff, and I trying to always manage it. "Listen to each other, use your communication skills, use an 'I' message". I mean, it just felt like being a referee or something in a game, and I don't even like games, so.....And I know that's why I became more and more distanced. As I lost the person I was relating to as an equal and as more and more I felt like I was parenting four children, not three, I became really quite cold. And am still quite cold.

So Adam's way to be strong was to lay down the law? But that didn't seem to win your respect, and it didn't win the kids respect.

No, it got absolutely no respect.

How could he have got some power from somewhere?

If he had spent time building one on one relationships with each of us, and try and focus on the good, in other words, not focus on the person who is being a real creep, but devoting his energy to a healthy relationship with me, some activities with the kids that were one on one, if he'd given himself more time to do that, it would have been better for him. To try and relate to us as a group when we had been together for so long and through so much, and had so much baggage, I think would be destined for failure, no matter how skilled or able he was. I don't think he could have related to us as a group, until he had strong one on one friendships with each of us. And primarily with me. I mean, if I was the person he wanted to get involved with, and I say that with a question mark, because I think he in many ways wanted an instant family, that the family might have been more important than I was. But assuming that I was more important, then probably more time needed to go into the relationship with me, and less either critiquing my parenting style or trying to manage the kids or control them. I think control behavior is just the dumbest thing in the world for a step father to attempt.

It seems like the standard fare, though. Let me into your family so I can set things straight.

Yeah. I'll clean up everything. It's so sad, so sad, because it just doesn't work.

You know, I'd be interested in talking to more men to find out where that idea comes from. I think it's the old patriarchal- you know, father is the nominal head of the house, or...

He's the boss.

And however badly that system has worked, that's been the model that a lot of men have grown up with, and maybe get away from what they do naturally as human beings in terms of relating to other people, and say, "Okay, now if I'm going to be the father in this family, what do I have to do?" So they start looking at all this stuff that's not really a natural flow with the people that are there, but "I'm the father, and you're the kids, so this is the pattern of how I'm going to interact with you."

Right. And pattern is the key word, because there is no spontaneity. So how do you develop a relationship, when you're lacking in spontaneity?

My idea is that love comes through playfulness.

Love, intimacy, a lot of those things come through gifts of time and play- listening. All the more They're really

kind of child-like things, I guess. Just to be full of wonder about that other person.

Giving but not directing, somehow.

That's a really nice way to put it. And building trust. Giving is a part of that's how the trust gets built. Giving of time, giving of energy. So this pattern isn't unusual, as we're talking?

No. The whole business of discipline, control....

The message at the end of the finger.

The kinds of things you were describing as giving and building trust, intimacy and so on. Those are not passive activities, but somehow they are less active than task or maintaining order.

They're definitely more right brain than left brain- would be more...

Boy, that's a whole interesting area to look at in terms of what the person who wrote "Getting the Love You Want" was talking about. It's tremendously exciting to think about that, in terms of where does parenting come from, or where do our loving relationships develop. I want to look for that when I go through and see maybe....This whole business of family activities, and what felt good and what got in people's way of being close- That comes out time and time again. It would be interesting to kind of look at different activities that either facilitate or get in the way, and see if there is some kind of connection.

Yeah. The premier's study on recreation, and the finding that if you have more money to put into recreation you enhance the quality of family life. I mean at some level that could be where this all comes out. That if people would learn to play more effectively and enjoy themselves, that they could build more lasting, more healthy relationships, as opposed to doing what their parents should have done or might have done, and getting into those kinds of traps. So it's interesting to just think of the word "play" in terms of all this. I guess we should all be playing at being step-parents, as opposed to "trying to manage the role".

It's the whole business of spontaneity. I think that's fascinating. Because I think what draws people together in a loving relationship is...

Fun, support, nurturing. Kind of a refuge from the storm of life. When people talk about a good family, they say they feel enriched when they've been there and they come out

refreshed. Yeah, those things are all about fun and playing and relaxation. They're not about therapy or more structure.

My own experience was feeling like I was homeless and I wanted a home. And there's a whole kind of big and abstract what it is that makes me feel "at home", makes anyone feel "at home". That was something that was very slow in coming.

Gee, that's a neat thought. I have to be very clear on what I think is home, what I know is home, and how home feels, before I can start to transmit that to the people around me, including my children and my step children. If I'm just trying to make them make me a home, that's not nearly as effective as me defining what a home is and living that.

If only we could stop the world for just a moment and say, "Okay, now what is it that I was trying to establish here?" But with all the stuff going on between all the people, there is no still point really where you can reflect on that.

Well, in a way, I've had my still point in talking with you. It's funny, it really was significant in my process. So, just the technique you're using, of interviewing people and letting them go on about what things are like- you know, that non-directive stuff is... would probably be a wonderful support to a step family. If we could encourage them to go into that early, to take a little time for each person to reflect on their process, my sense is that it might get a little more sane. But it would sure take a lot of time. All those babbling step-parents.

But they deserve to be listened to. And I think that people can become their own resource, in a way, become aware of their process. I think 95% of the world doesn't know what process is, even though they experience it every day. I think most people see events in life, but they don't look at what happens between A and B, or how they got there. I mean I've been at school for a long time, and I'm just beginning to understand what that's all about. When it's talked about within the system, I think it comes down to right and wrong....

Yeah, and who's the bad guy and who's the good guy, and how can I manipulate the situation to get everybody to do what I want. Yeah, I think family therapy has it's place. Like your standard family therapy, but I think this process is more me reflecting, sort of me holding my life in my hands, and saying, "Well, what do I really want out of this life, and what am I trying to create or something, as a parent". That's totally different from getting into a tactical maneuver with the family to try to make it function. This is the reverse.

I was talking to another student who is doing a qualitative study, and some of his people are writing their own stuff and just passing it in to him....

Like the Progoff thing...Yes.

That might be one way of doing this within your own time, with your own issues, just dialog with the issues.

I think it would be exciting to dialog with the issues. I think in a fragmented way. I've dealt with the family in my diary, but not in a more solid way. I think you're right. I think that would be a great technique.

He was quite intrigued, too, with the process that people go through from experience, to thinking about, to writing stuff down. There's lots of working with experience between the time it happens until the time it gets written down. I'm looking forward to getting this stuff written up...

You've done so many interviews, it must be exciting, doing the synthesizing....

Well, it's not quite there yet.

Well, I appreciate you asking me to be part of the process. It would be fun to hear the results.

And that's something that I want to do, is share with all the people I have interviewed. To me that's...I don't know if you're familiar with qualitative studies, but....

A little bit. My study was more quantitative. There was some qualitative work in it. But several of my friends are doing qualitative research, and I really like it. I think once the computer blesses it.....

It's gotta be good....

But I've seen quite a variety. I do think it gives you a different quality in the information than it does when you look at all the stats.

That's one of the checks for validity, is to read it back to people, and to say, "Can you find yourself in here?"
(laughter)

You'll have to change my name to something....

Yeah. Absolutely.

But, I'll let you know if I recognize myself. (more laughter)

Is there anything else that you've thought of that you'd like to talk about?

I can't think of a thing. I've just really enjoyed it.

I'm happy to hear that. It's been really nice. I'm really excited by all of the tangents we've touched on, and had a chance to talk about some of that stuff.

Great. Super. Well, so we're done.

APPENDIX B

DESCRIPTION OF STUDY TO CO-RESEARCHERS

"Consent to Participate" Form

Consent to Participate

I am aware that the purpose of this study is to understand the experience of men who are parents in blended families. Through interviews, I will be asked to describe my experiences as a parent in as much detail as possible. The study will be conducted as a Master in Education Thesis by David Thompson, under the supervision of Dr. John Osborne, Professor, both from the Department of Educational Psychology, University of Alberta.

I agree to participate in the study and to be interviewed about my experiences as a parent in a blended family. I understand that one or two interviews of about one to two hours will be tape recorded. I agree that my participation is completely voluntary, and realize that I may discontinue my involvement at any time. I am aware of the risk that in discussing my experiences, feelings and memories of conflict may be aroused. If I raise concerns which I desire to discuss further with a counsellor, David Thompson will suggest resource persons I might contact.

I am aware that all information is confidential and that my identity, along with the identity of anyone I mention, will not be revealed at any time. I understand that in any portion of the interview transcripts used in the final report, in articles or in talks about the research, details will be changed so as to make my identification impossible. As well,

the audiotapes and interview transcripts will be stored under lock and key by David Thompson. Audiotapes will be erased by him upon completion of transcription. Transcripts will be disguised so as to protect my confidentiality, and will be maintained as confidential files. If they are to be used for any additional analysis in future research, separate ethical approval by an Ethics Committee will be required.

Any questions I have about the study at any time will be answered by David Thompson (phone 439-4781). I also understand that at my request, he will discuss the results of the study with me when it is completed.

On the basis of the above information, I,

agree to participate in the above study.

SIGNED _____ DATE _____

ADDRESS _____

WITNESSED _____ DATE _____

APPENDIX C

LETTER TO DOUG
REQUESTING VALIDATION FEEDBACK

Box 73,
Widewater, Alberta
TOG 2MO
December 19, 1991

Dear Doug,

Finally, as promised! Sorry for the long, long delay. I hadn't intended it, but you know about the best laid plans of mice and men.

I'm sending you 2 copies of a synthesis based on our conversations as well as a copy of our interview excerpts. You are welcome to keep one copy of the synthesis and the transcript for yourself. With the second copy of the synthesis, please make any corrections, deletions, clarifications and the like. I want to be sure I have understood your experience as fully and completely as possible.

Take your time in doing this. I realize that reading this may be difficult, but I also hope it gives you a sense of the evolution in your relationship. When you've done, please send it back to me and I'll integrate changes into my discussion.

I appreciate your contribution to my work, both in the process of research and our relationships with family. I hope to see you during the Christmas Holidays and have a chance to talk some more then.

Thanks, Doug. Take care!